

Prologue: The Hero

The boy's skin felt warm, and even before he opened his eyes, he knew it was morning...

And he was nauseous!

The first day of school was approaching, and today some of his belongings, those needed for school and what not, would be packed into a trunk. Then it was off to the train station where he would meet up with many more students all heading for their school.

However, that last bit was what worried the boy the most. He really did not want to be around so many people. It always became a bit... hectic when he did. Many would fawn over him, praise him for something that happened when he was too young to even remember anything, and there were even some who glared at him, whispering undoubtedly sinister plots that surely entailed his demise...

Yes, he was quite nauseous.

He scratched absentmindedly at an unusually shaped scar he had received when he was quite young, and rubbed at his weary eyes. He could hear people bustling about downstairs, and if he did not get up and ready soon, he would get an earful!

The boy stood by his cart, loaded with his trunk and other things, waiting for all of it to be packed away onto a scarlet train. Steam billowed out of it and rose to merge with the clouds in the sky, and just as the boy had assumed, there were indeed many people already talking about him. Most of the people would try to stare at him inconspicuously, walking by and slowing as they did so, trying to sneak a peek at him, as if they thought their behavior was normal, but they would always fail. Especially the ones that would literally stop for several moments to gawk at him.

And just as there were the ones who gawked... there were the ones that glowered in his direction. Those were the ones that the boy really never wanted to be around. Those kinds of people always made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

He had never really understood what made the people react so bizarrely around him. Sure, he "vanquished" a dark lord... But that had happened when he was just a baby! He didn't remember any of it, so why did all the people still treat him like he was some kind of... of... hero?

... or enemy?

Finally, someone came to fetch his things. They bowed kind of awkwardly when they approached the boy, and it made the boy's stomach squirm. He never really liked it when people did things like that. He was sure he was really no different or more special than other people, so he could never wrap his mind around the "special" treatment he received. His cart was hauled away to be put on the train, and the boy solemnly walked to board the train himself. He had already said his goodbyes. Now he was trying to prepare himself to say hello to a new school year.

He didn't think the hello would be as welcoming as hellos could be.

When the train finally came to a halt, night had already fallen. One by one, students filed out of the train, and stepped out into the warm outside. Stars glistened far up into the dark, blue sky, as a booming voice from a very large man called out from the darkness for all the first years to make their way over to him. The boy did as he was told, and soon a crowd of small children congregated around what the boy only imagined to be a giant.

"Alrigh' there are we?" said the giant. The boy mused that even if was light out, he still wouldn't be able to clearly see the giant-man's face it was framed by so much wiry hair! "Now all the firs' years will get into the boats." The giant turned around and started walking up a hill. Just like the boy, it seemed the other kids didn't know if they were meant to trail the giant or not, so all just stood there.

Probably sensing the lack of kids behind him, the giant turned around and a thunderous laugh erupted from him. "Come on now! This way! Can' get to school if we don' get onto the boats now, can we?" He chuckled on as all the kids hesitated a moment more, and then all rushed forward to follow him.

The group walked on, and the boy tried his hardest to ignore all the other kids who whispered behind him, tried his best to ignore those

ahead of him that turned around every so often to stare at him. He was not very successful.

The train ride had been at least better than this. He had had enough sense to get to the station somewhat early and managed to snag an empty compartment for himself. As soon as he entered the compartment, he had locked the door behind him, and spent the ride to his new school in quiet solitude.

He gulped nervously as one particular boy with fair skin, and pale blond hair stopped to stare at him. He looked the boy up and down for what seemed like for forever to the boy, smirked, and whispered to one of his friends who immediately began to laugh.

It didn't appear to the boy that the pale faced boy was one of the those people who praised him.

They all finally came to a lake that looked as if it were black glass, the waters were so dark and smooth. The boy shuddered to think what lurked in those murky waters, and so tried to occupy his thoughts instead with the many wooden boats that floated atop it.

He found a boat occupied by a singular person. He stumbled in, rocking the boat as he did so, and the person, a girl with short and straight brown hair, reached out to clutch the sides of the boat as if trying to steady it. The boy, once he had sat down, smiled at her sheepishly and mumbled an apology. She didn't say anything but stared at him wide eyed instead. The boy felt his cheeks heat, and he looked away.

"Blimey!" she said at last. Her voice was girly and the very epitome of surprise. The boy turned his head further really hoping the girl wasn't about to go on some speech professing admiration or anything. "You're shorter than I imagined."

It took a moment for the girl's words to register, and the boy just remained in a dumbfounded silence. When he finally looked up at the girl, she was smiling at him earnestly. The boy felt himself relax greatly, and soon they started up a conversation. It was awkward at first, at least for the boy, but the girl was so friendly and genuine, that eventually the boy fell into complete relaxation.

The chattering two were soon joined by two others. The boy didn't pay much attention to them, despite the fact that he could feel their eyes upon him. He was too busy having a normal conversation with a perfect stranger! For once! And he thought then, as he felt the boat move beneath him, that maybe the new school year wouldn't be as bad. He might even manage a decent hello after all.

When the first years finally hit land again, there was a tall, statuesque woman awaiting them. They all hurried out, and the giant, with his huge strides, quickly took the lead. Once he was but a few feet away from the lady- the kids still many, many paces behind- he bowed slightly.

"All here Professor McGonagall," he announced proudly, his voice deafening in the quiet outside.

"Thank you Hagrid," the lady replied. As the boy and the others approached, it was very apparent to him that though the lady was older, she was definitely not someone to cross. Her voice was stern as was her posture. Her hair was pulled into a neat and tight bun, and she wore glasses that framed her shrewd eyes. As the kids drew nearer, the lady lifted a lantern which illuminated her face. It was aged and lined, and her lips were pressed into a thin line. Her firm expression, though, was what really made the boy wary. Nothing would get past this lady.

"Alright students!" came the lady's voice as the giant named Hagrid hurried on into the school, "Follow me now!"

If the boy had not read about the school beforehand, he was sure that the very sight of it would have stunned him. The school didn't look like a school at all but a very old and ancient castle. Towers upon towers created a jagged silhouette against the dark sky, and with the pale, crescent moon looming behind, the castle looked very ominous.

Just gazing at the majestic form of the architecture made the boy shiver slightly, and he wondered if he was the only one who did so. The other kids' faces were a mix of surprise, sleep, or boredom. The ones that wore expressions of surprise were probably the ones that hadn't previously known that they were wizards, the boy mused.

With tentative steps, the boy finally crossed the wide, stone threshold of the castle-school and entered.

As soon as the stern lady, whom the boy now knew was his transfiguration teacher, had called his name, the whole of the great hall, where all the first years had been led to in order to be sorted into their appropriate houses, had gone silent. If the boy hadn't felt awkward before, he certainly did now. As he stepped out from the diminishing group of first years (many of them had already been sorted), his steps seemed to echo in the blaring silence.

He approached the lady, Professor McGonagall, and a stool, upon which sat a very worn and toppled hat. It wasn't just any ordinary hat though. Once the boy was at the stool, the lady picked up the hat and the boy took it's place upon the stool. As he situated himself upon the seat, he felt the hat enclose his head... and it spoke.

"Ah yes," came the hat's voice, and the boy listened intently. "I have been waiting for our legend to arrive." It's voice was low and laced with that tone of humor that came about only when one has seen many, many days gone by. The boy gulped and lowered his eyes so that he didn't have to see the others gaping at him in abated breath.

"Hmm..." the hat hummed as it's brim wriggled around the boy's ears. "Very interesting indeed..." The boy was about to ask what it meant by that when he was cut off by the hat's booming cry.

"GRYFFINDOR!" it shouted, and as the hat was removed from his head, the boy's ears were slightly ringing.

One side of the hall erupted into a loud and seemingly victorious applause. The boy hobbled off to that side upon which he was instantly welcomed with pats on the back. The boy gave a small smile as he sat at his house's table, but his stomach dropped a little. He kind of wanted to go into the same house as the girl he had met earlier, but she had been sorted into Ravenclaw.

An old man arose from a table where all the other teachers were seated. He was very old, the oldest amongst the teachers. He had a white beard that was the same length as his waist long, white hair, and he had blue eyes that twinkled behind half moon spectacles. All he needed to do was raise one wrinkled hand, and the hall fell silent.

The boy diverted his full attention to the old man whom he knew from legends as the great wizard (and headmaster of the school) Albus Dumbledore. Professor Dumbledore began to speak softly, but his voice carried all the same. As the boy listened to the headmaster talk about how the forbidden forest was off limits, a boy with red hair and freckles turned to him.

"Hello," said the red-headed boy, "Name's Ron Weasley." He held out a hand which the boy looked at apprehensively, but upon deciding that it would be best not to be rude, took it.

"It's nice to meet you," the boy said as they shook hands, "My name is-

"I know," Ron replied, letting his hand go. "Everyone knows who you are... Neville Longbottom."

A/N: Well! There it is! Please leave this author your comments and what not! I hope you enjoyed it and will continue to read! I know that the twist in the end may be cliché, but stick with me. I'll make it worth your while!

Chapter 1: A Journey to Town

"Oi! Harry! Are you ready yet?" shouted a tall boy who stood before an equally tall (and lavish) fireplace. A boy with messy black hair looked up from the small sheet of paper he was reading and smiled at the one who had called him.

"Yeah I'm ready to go," he sighed. He glanced one more time at the paper and frowned. It had been delivered the day before by a brown owl. The bird bore two others, but Harry had been expecting them. He had taken the letters from the eager bird, given it a treat, and watched it fly away out an open window. When Harry had taken the one addressed to him, he had known, by the wax seal that had closed the envelope, that it was his school list. "Why doesn't the school supply half of this stuff Edward?" he asked presently as he folded the paper and pocketed it.

The one named Edward shifted his weight from his left leg to his right and looked over at Harry tiredly. "I don't know mate. Suppose good ol' Hogwarts can't afford supplying all us students." He smiled then, the look saying all too well that he really didn't know in the slightest how or why Hogwarts did certain things, and Harry smiled back. It was a new school for both of them.

Harry pushed up his glasses that had slipped slightly down his nose, and made his way over to Edward who was scratching impatiently at the stone walls of the hearth as if picking away dirt. At first glance, the fireplace would have seemed to be some sort of elaborate entrance, what with it's height and intricate design. That's at least what Harry had thought when he had first seen it. He remembered how he had almost chocked on the very air only a week ago when he had realized that it was just a fireplace.

After the initial shock had worn off, he merely shrugged off the wonder and decided that such a thing was normal when it came to the prestigious Cole family, and now not even the opals that were embedded in the slate-like stone surprised him any more. Of course, it did feel too grand for Harry, thinking it like the old house a lot better to this one. He shrugged it off.

"Why are we going to this school again?" Harry asked as he stopped beside his taller friend. Harry felt a draft from the massive fireplace wrap around him. The fireplace stood taller than any man Harry

knew, well, almost every man, so drafts were common. It was just another thing to add to the list of why Harry hated traveling this way. Presently, Edward sighed and shook his head, his brown hair swaying slightly as he did so.

"Harry, I know you're only joking but if you ask one more time... I'm going to hex you." Edward had stated the last bit so sternly that Harry began to laugh.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'll see how well that works out," Harry responded, chuckling. Edward looked down at his laughing friend and then promptly flicked Harry's forehead. "Hey! What was that for?" Harry asked, both chuckling and rubbing his forehead.

Edward was about to respond but had stopped just short of the first syllable. His brows furrowed together and he frowned. "What?" Harry asked, now genuinely confused.

"It's red," Edward said simply. Harry stopped rubbing his forehead, and dropped his arm down to his side. He turned his head and stared at one of the pillars that encased the fireplace.

"Yeah, well, I imagine it would be," Harry replied tersely.

"When it flares up like that, you shouldn't pick at-" Edward began to lecture.

"I know Edward!" Harry interjected. Edward shut his mouth quickly and sighed.

"Yeah... I know you know, mate." Harry followed the vine like design that trailed up the hearth's pillar, hoping that if he stared long enough, the awkward tension in the air would dissipate- he hated people talking about the weird scar on his forehead. Luckily, he didn't have to wait long.

Into the room, stumbled another boy. He was carrying a precarious amount of papers and scrolls in his arms, and his face was lost amongst the mountain they made.

"About time!" Edward exclaimed, throwing his arms into the air. There came a muffled reply from the tower of papers that bustled across the marble floors, but Harry didn't hear what was said.

"I'm sorry. What was that Alex?" Edward asked, resuming his earlier task of picking at the stone walls. The mount of scrolls stopped before a table before they spilled out unto it, some even rolling off the side. Soon a face, much like that of Edward's, emerged.

"I said," came the irritated voice of the new boy, "don't get that tone with me."

"I wouldn't have had to if someone hadn't kept us waiting," Edward replied curtly.

"Well, I was busy carrying out a task father asked of me," the other said.

"Oh don't even, Alex! Carrying out a task. Please! You're just running an errand for father, and not even an important one... paper boy." Harry decided, by the way Alex's face morphed into one of raging indignation, that it was time to intercede.

"What are all those scrolls for Alex?" Harry asked sweetly, but loudly. Alex paused in the middle of opening his mouth and let out a huff of air- instead of what Harry was sure would have been nothing decent- before replying. Edward smirked at the obvious surrender, at which he got a jab in the side from Harry's elbow.

"They're just some of the maps father was looking at earlier. Him and the Earl are now pouring over some other accounts," Alex said all importantly.

"Well let's hurry on then before dear ol' dad calls his beloved paperboy back in," Edward said sarcastically while trying to shake off the soot that had collected on the hem of his pants. Harry jabbed his elbow into Edward's side again.

"What I do?" Edward asked, whining.

"Just shut it for a moment," Harry said, wiping away the now stirred up soot that had landed on his glasses with the sleeve of his robe.

"Aw... it was only a joke. Besides, Alex isn't upset. Are you brother?" Edward asked, looking over to the other boy who had started sorting through the papers.

"Not at the moment, but allow me thirty more minutes with you to make it otherwise," Alex replied. Harry started laughing, as he put his glasses back in place, and Edward feigned hurt.

"Your words are poison brother," Edward pouted dramatically. Alex smiled from where he stood and began to pick up some of the scrolls again. "Honestly now! What are you doing now?" Edward demanded as he caught that his brother was apparently not yet ready to leave.

"Hold on a moment," Alex replied.

"You've had enough moments," Edward shouted. "Let's hurry before the crowd makes it's way to Diagon Alley!"

"We really should hurry Alex," Harry said a bit nicer. Alex stopped after putting one scroll away in a bin.

"I guess you're right, Harry," Alex sighed.

"Yes, luckily Harry's here to make the important observations," Edward muttered. Alex placed the few scrolls he was carrying back onto the table, and made his way over to his two companions. Harry watched as Alex went to grab a bowl that was filled with what looked like glittering ash.

Alex stopped just before the two others and held the bowl out to them. All three of the boys' hands delved into the ash-like substance, and they each grasped a handful of it. After placing the bowl back onto the stand it had been resting on, the three stood fully in the fireplace.

"I really hate this," Harry groaned, as some of the powder slipped between his fingers. Both Edward and Alex smiled.

"We know Harry," Edward said.

"But then again, you hate all methods of wizardly travel," Alex finished.

"Not true!" Harry protested. "I like flying. I just hate traveling by floo powder," and at this, Harry fixed the powder in his hand with a

disgusted look. Both of the brothers began laughing, and after a while of it, Harry kicked the closet one, which happen to be Edward.

"Ow! Merlin you're violent," Edward said, with a mixture of a hiss and a laugh. "And they say people like me are violent." Alex coughed nervously, and Harry didn't say another word. "Lighten' up you gits," Edward said exasperatedly. "Let's just get to Diagon, shall we?" Alex and Harry nodded their heads mutely, and Edward smiled. "Good. Let's then." All three held out their powder-filled hands.

"Diagon Alley!" the three exclaimed as they threw down the substance. As soon as the powder hit the floor, a green flame erupted and swallowed the trio. Harry shut his eyes fiercely as the fire consumed them entirely, and when the flames cleared, the three had vanished.

It never mattered how many times Harry prepared himself for it, though. He spun and spun as he was whisked away. Many other fireplaces whirled passed him. He never had time to focus on any one of the network of fireplaces as he was pulled along forward. Green flames whizzed beside him, and he felt sick. Yes... he had always hated traveling by floo powder.

Finally, the pulling stopped, and Harry tumbled out of another fireplace. He groaned for a moment before being hoisted up by a composed Alex and Edward.

"Can't you ever come out of the floo network gracefully?" Edward asked, brushing off some of the soot on Harry's shoulder.

"Shut it," Harry retorted, straightening out his crooked glasses. "The question is, how can you guys do it?"

"Skills my friend," Edward said.

"You just pick up on it after awhile," came the gentler voice of Alex. Harry snorted at that.

"I've been doing it almost as long as you two, but I still mangle to look like a git when we land," Harry scoffed.

"Ere by proving we're your betters, Harry," Edward said sternly, patting Harry's shoulder consolably. Both Harry and Alex looked to

the taller boy before both slapped him across the head. "I'm only joking!" Edward laughed, as he shielded himself from any other further possible attacks. Harry shook his head, as Alex began to lecture Edward.

Harry ignored the brothers to take in his surroundings. He had only ever been to Diagon Alley once before, but he had been so young then that he could barely remember the place.

The room they had landed in looked to be like some kind of handsome parlor. A comfortable looking green leather chair stood to Harry's left, and an equally inviting red chair sat to his right. Before him was a great oak table with plates of miniature sandwiches. Harry's stomach rumbled then, and he remembered that he hadn't yet eaten breakfast. However, though there was food right in front of him, he didn't quite trust the idle sandwiches.

A little light streamed in through the parted burgundy curtains that adorned a little window. Harry walked over to it, eager to see what the town would look like, but as he gazed out of the window, all he could see was what appeared to be a regular muggle city.

"Hey you two," Harry shouted, breaking the brothers' steadily rising squabble. "We are in Diagon Alley aren't we?" Harry looked at the two. Alex had Edward in a headlock while Edward was pushing up on Alex's chin. From the bizarre position he was imprisoned in, Edward took in his surroundings.

"- 'Course we are, mate!" Edward smiled.

"This is the Leaky Cauldron," Alex stated as he released his brother. Harry looked out the window again and marveled at how... muggle-ish Diagon Alley looked.

"Well, how was I supposed to know that wasn't the Diagon Alley?" Harry asked irritably. Someone ruffled his hair, and Harry sped up to escape it.

"Calm down Harry!" came Edward's laugh. "It was funny!"

"Shut it Edward," Harry muttered as he tried to smooth down his hair.

"You have to admit though," came Alex's voice from behind him. "... it was pretty priceless." Harry heard the two brothers begin to laugh hysterically, and as he spun around to hex them, the two were doubled over with the fits of hysteria. Harry felt immensely agitated.

"I'm going to go get my school supplies." He turned back around. "And I won't treat you two to Florean's ice cream!" he called out.

"Aw come on Harry! We were only joking with you!" Alex shouted after Harry.

"Yeah! I want fire whiskey flavored ice cream!" Edward shouted. Harry didn't hear what else they said as he walked on, but he imagined he did hear the sound of Edward getting a well deserved smack from Alex. Harry smiled at the thought and fiddle around with the coins in his pocket.

It was most definitely time to visit Diagon's bank: Gringotts. Mrs. Cole did tell him that his old account had been transferred already, and all he needed to do was present his key which was currently in his back pocket. He was pretty excited to see the goblins that were said to run the whole bank, and besides, Harry didn't have quite enough for school shopping and ice cream for three.

Now that Harry was alone, he could appreciate Diagon Alley better. Two noisy brothers were too much of a distraction sometimes.

Harry passed many shops, and did his best to side step the busy, bustling crowd of shoppers that filled the little street of Diagon. Sometimes he wasn't successful and bumped into many a wizard and witch. He wondered then how he had managed the last time he came here... if he did at all. It was a bit hazy, but he figured the massive form of Hagrid was enough to part the crowds.

Harry's pockets were almost stuffed full of coins now that he had returned from Gringotts- the goblins had been a lot less agreeable than he had imagined, and the many gold galleons, silver sickles, and bronze knuts jangled as he walked. It was a test of wills for Harry, walking past all the amazing shops of Diagon Alley. The towns back home had been more sparse and scenic than bustling like Diagon.

There were so many things in the numerous shops that were just too tempting for a young, pocket- filled Harry. He walked past apothecaries, candy shops, shops with all kinds of weird and interesting oddities, and shops where he couldn't even see in there were so many people crowding around the windows and doors.

Outside the astrology shop, on a little stand, were a bunch of bottles with little glistening lights. Some were burning red, while others were orange or white, and there were even a few that were a deep blue. A sign right above the glowing spheres read:

Miniature Star Charms:

Get your own pocket-sized star!

Great for any stargazer

"Dad! Do you think they have the Morning Star?" Harry heard a little girl ask, as she pulled on the hem of an older man's robes.

"That's a planet sweetie," the man chuckled, as he tried to usher the girl along. "Come on now, Daddy has to buy Mommy some more murtlap essence!"

Harry sighed, pulled out his school list from amongst the coins, and set himself to follow the task at hand... no matter the lovely, glistening broom that called to him from the corner of his eye.

He read the list. It called for all the usual supplies: wand- Yes... Most important, Harry thought, but he already had the one he had found at the shop back in America. The list also called for one cauldron, phials, parchment, quills... the usual. His uniform looked pretty plain to him. At least his old school had a bit more fun with theirs.

The important part of the list was about which books Harry needed, and there were a lot on there. Harry was happy to know that a lot of them were ones he had already read, like: The Standard Book of Spells (Grade Two) by Miranda Goshawk and Creating Better Concoctions: A Guide to Brews, draughts, and Elixirs by Calixto Charles. There were, however, all these books he needed by the same name: A Gilderoy Lockhart, it seemed. Harry hadn't heard of

the last set of books- title and author both- and wondered what teacher needed all of them.

Harry re-pocketed the list, and decided that after he was fitted for his robes, he'd tackle the books. Maybe he could even get a few others for fun.

When Harry arrived at Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, he was fighting an inner battle with himself. He thought he had shown great strength ignoring the merchandise in Zonko's Joke shop window. Better yet was the resolution he had shown resisting the urge to buy the broom that sat oh so poised in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

But as Harry had walked past Eyelop's Owl Emporium, he had to fight the greatest temptation yet.

Sitting on a perch outside of the shop with it's head under it's wing, was a beautiful, snowy white owl. Harry found himself stopping just to look at it. The bird was stunning, but when it lifted it's head and fixed Harry with its great, golden eyes, Harry had felt the sudden urge to run into the store, throw down all the money in his pockets, and buy the owl.

The list did say that pets were allowed at Hogwarts.

But... would that be wise?

Harry had managed just fine using the owls at his previous school all those years. Besides, life with the Cole family was very uncertain, and he really didn't want Alex and Edward's father asking Harry if he could use Harry's owl for one of the many tasks he always had going on.

So it was with a heavy heart that Harry had walked away, and he thought as he had trudged on, that the bird had followed his every movement.

Harry hadn't realized that he had gone into a reverie outside the robe shop until a plump woman had knocked into him, so she could get through the door Harry was blocking. Harry mumbled his apologies and opened the door the lady had allowed to slam shut in

his face. As he opened the door, a small, little musical tune began to play.

"Be with you in just a moment!" came a woman's raspy voice from somewhere in the back of the shop. "Just have a seat by the counter!" Harry nodded his head, though he didn't know if the voice could see him or not, and did as he was instructed, but it was hard to find the counter amongst the piles and piles of fabric about the store.

Harry took his seat. Soon the plump woman from earlier came into view, and Harry watched her as she bustled about the shop. She was wearing a very gaudy, hot pink fur wrap with a funny little hat to match. Harry resisted the need to laugh, and so averted his attention to a wall of faux dragon hide. He did hear the woman say something along the lines of, "These fabrics are so drab! You can find better quality in cauldron cozies!"

After several minutes of similar comments, Harry really wished he had better things to distract himself other than just fabrics.

"Please be still," came the same raspy voice. "It's hard to pin this when you keep moving."

"No. Your hands just keep shaking," came a second voice.

"Honestly now," the raspy voiced woman chided, who Harry now thought was Madam Malkin.

"Ow! That hurt!" the second voice cried. It sounded like a young boy to Harry.

"Well, I told you to stop your squirming."

"Father was right. We should have gone to Titan's. At least he had better things to choose from," the boy remarked, and Harry thought he sounded very snobbish. Harry was beginning to think that Madam Malkin received very rude customers indeed. He decided then that he, at least, would be respectful. "I suppose I could use this as a way to get my father to buy me that new racing broom," the boy drawled.

"I suppose you're not talking about that broom- What are they calling it these day? The Nimbus Two-"

"You mean the Nimbus Two- Thousand and Two," the boy interrupted.

"Yes, that's the one. I've had kids in and out of here all this week, and not but three minutes in here, and they'll start pining about that broom," Madam Malkin said, clucking her tongue three times afterwards.

"And they should! That broom is amazing! It's the fastest one out there!" the boy said more excitedly. "It even comes with its own specific cleaning kit, it's so much better! I can just imagine trying out for my house team with that broom! Can you imagine flying on it? I wonder how fast it is..."

He sounded like an enthusiastic child, and Harry, despite his earlier assumption of the boy, began to smile. He, too, could imagine what it would be like to own such a spectacular broom, and the picture it created was really splendid.

"Alright deary! All done! Why don't you hop right off the stool," Madam Malkin said. Harry didn't think he imagined the sweeter tone she used. There came a thudding sound and a scrapping of a stool against the wooden floor. "All that's left is a bit of hemming, a snip or two, and it'll be finish. It'll be delivered to you tomorrow. Do you already have your house tie and what not?"

"Of course I do," and the boy was back to the drawling, stuck-up tone of earlier.

"Yes, well... Have a lovely day, dear," Madam Malkin said more stiffly. There came no reply, but soon Harry saw a pale blond head bobbing past the tower of fabrics. Harry watched as the head made it's way to the door, and when the boy finally reached it, Harry thought that the boy, from the back at least, looked to be about his age. The door was opened, the little tune playing again, and the boy left.

"Alright deary. How can I help you today?" Harry looked to the old woman who stood before him. Madam Malkin was short and hunched, with many needles in her hair and pinned to her own robes.

Harry smiled at her and replied, "Just need some school robes Ma'am." She too smiled at him.

"Right this way deary," and Harry followed her to the back of the store. "If you would," she said gesturing to a stool that was placed before three great mirrors. Harry did as he was told, and did his best not to criticize his three reflections too much.

He removed his simple grey robes so that Madam Malkin could set to work. His clothes underneath were decent, being just a simple black pair of pants and white-collar shirt. It was just his hair! No matter what he- or anyone else for that matter- did, his hair always stuck up on every end. It was like he dedicated all of his time to looking as if he had just woken up and rolled out of bed.

Mr. Lupin had told him once- on one of the rare occasions he came to visit the Cole family- that he thought he remembered Harry's dad having the same kind of uncontrollable hair. Harry was comforted by that small knowledge, but there were still those times when he wished he could make it look neater, especially when the Coles threw one of their many lavish parties or when diplomats were gathered at one of their estates.

But his hair played its part. It did manage to cover his weird scar that Mrs. Cole was always fussing about.

"All right dear! I want you to keep still for me now," Madam Malkin said to Harry, as she pulled out her wand. She gave it a swift flick, and soon all sorts of things like tape measurers, fabrics, and pins were zipping about Harry. "Don't want to accidentally poke you now, do we?" Madam Malkin smiled as she set to work on measuring the length of his arm, and Harry had to duck when a pair of sharp scissors whizzed too closely to his head.

Harry's ice cream was really tasty. It seems that Mr. Fortescue deserved the praise he got, the ice cream was some of the best Harry had ever had. It even beat the ice cream that the Cole family's house elves would make sometimes.

After Harry had finished up buying the books he needed, he had met back up with Alex and Edward, both who had arms laden with bags upon bags, and Harry suspected not all of them were filled with school supplies.

Presently, the boys sat at a table outside of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, each eating their ice cream- Harry's treat, of course. The shop owner had shown the three to a nice table under a bright orange umbrella, in which they had a perfect view of Diagon Alley and all it's shoppers.

"So after we're done here, we'll finish up right?" Edward asked, as he tilted his head to lick the ice cream dripping down his cone.

"Yeah... I still have a lot of stuff to buy," Harry sighed. He felt really sore. He hated standing in one place for too long, and he could still feel where Madam Malkin had occasionally pricked him with needles.

"So do we," Alex said as he finished up the last bit of ice cream.

"But you guys already have so many bags!" Harry said. "What other stuff do you still need to get?" Harry pulled out his list, and read over it quickly. After a moment, he glanced up from the paper and fixed the two brothers with a knowing look. Edward flicked some of his ice cream at Harry, and Harry returned fire. The bit of ice cream landed right in Edward's eye.

All three erupted into laughter, which made the many other customers turn their heads to them in annoyance. They placed their hands over their mouths to stifle it, but it did little good. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw the shop owner, Mr. Fortescue, smile at them.

By the time they had calmed down, Harry's remaining bit of ice cream had completely melted.

"Can you blame us though, Harry?" Edward asked, a bit breathlessly, lightly kicking some of the bags that laid at his feet.

"I bet you were quite tempted yourself, mate," Alex said, wiping away a tear in his eye. Harry thought about the white owl he saw outside Earl's Owl Emporium, and smiled.

"Here's to a new school year," Harry said, holding up the cone of liquidated ice cream. Alex and Edward smiled, as they held up their own- and considerably more empty- cones. "Bottoms up."

And Harry drank the last bit of ice cream and decided that he really wanted that white owl.

Chapter 2: A Disquieting Night

Nights were always so dark during the new moon.

Harry stood before his opened window, straining his eyes as they darted about, and searched the night sky. A thin film of clouds hid the myriad of stars that gleamed high above, which made searching quite difficult for Harry. Still, from time to time the clouds would slightly part, revealing a star or two, and being so anxious as he was, Harry sometimes confused the glittering specks for his snowy owl. He was nothing short of downhearted when he realized that they were just stars.

He was beginning to regret letting his owl, a female he named Hedwig¾ a name Harry had found in one of Mr. Cole's history books¾ out. He didn't want to keep her cooped up in his room, but he began to think that he should have at least waited until morning. His eye site was already poor, but he thought even if he did have perfect vision, the sky was so black, he wouldn't have been able to see his owl anyway.

That didn't stop him from fidgeting about on his little window seat, though, nor did it prevent him from popping his head out of the large casement from time to time.

As dark as the sky was, the ground around the house was too. Harry had found, after the several nights spent in this new home, that he didn't like it very much. It seemed everything about the place was... just too unfamiliar, and he was having a hard time adjusting. It seemed the house was always dark. The rooms... the grounds surrounding it... the feel of it. Everything. Even when the sun was it's brightest, the house had a dark edge to it.

He liked the Coles' old home. It had belonged to Mrs. Cole's great aunt Erinna who had ruled the place as if she had been a queen herself. Harry could imagine why. The manor had sat upon a vast expanse of verdant lands where tiny streams and brooks ran through. That place was where Harry had first learned how to fly on a broom. Where he had lifted so far off the ground he had felt closer to a bird than a boy.

The house, too, had been perfect. All the rooms had an airy sense about them that made Harry feel as if being lazy was the only

natural way to be, of course that wasn't hard for a boy at a young age like Harry. Everything about it was... contented. Even the magic that was left over from previous generations of inhabitants felt better³/₄ all who had been Mrs. Cole's ancestors.

It was where Harry had made friends... had a family.

It was the first place that had ever felt like a home to Harry and not just some... building filled with awful people.

Harry shook his head. He didn't like thinking about that. He laid his head upon his folded arms, his elbows sticking out of the window somewhat. He had better and happier memories to think of now. Those happy memories was what made moving for Harry so difficult, but he knew that, though the Cole's new house... well, estate, was cavernous, empty, and dark, Harry still had Edward and Alex with him.

And now he even had his first familiar!

Once again, Harry wished he had waited until morning to let Hedwig out, or at least until he had inspected the area a little more. He hadn't really gone exploring yet because he just hadn't felt like it. He, Edward, and Alex had ventured into the forest that surrounded the manor only once, but the tangled woods had been so riddled with shadows, even when the sun was at it's highest point, that they had given up. Even as Harry looked out of his window, he could distinguish a dark line just below the clouds, and the canopy of the woods was thicker and darker than the clouded sky.

After more fretful-filled moments, Harry sighed. He told himself he really shouldn't be so worried, for his owl was quite intelligent. Her golden eyes that searched intently all about told Harry so. Harry turned his back to the night sky, trying to prove to himself that he could be relaxed, and sat facing his empty room.

At the Cole's other house, Harry's room had been cramped with various furniture, stacks of books, oddities he had collected over the years from travels with the Coles, and an assortment of wizarding toys and games that even at twelve years of age, Harry didn't tire from. Harry's new room housed all of that as well, but the space was so large that it made everything else seem so small. Even when both Alex and Edward were in his room with Harry, their voices

seemed to echo, but Mr. Cole liked the grandeur, and Harry supposed their old home wasn't quite splendid enough for the man's taste.

The new room, however, made Harry restless because, though it contained all his worldly possessions, the vastness of the room gave an impersonal sense to everything within it.

Harry turned his head to the side and saw nothing of his bird in his peripheral vision. When Harry had first brought Hedwig to the Cole's manor, he had taken her to his room, had opened the little wire door of the cage, and had let her out to fly about in the room. Harry had wanted Hedwig to get acclimated to her new home and to him, of course, but he had also wanted to see how much training his owl needed.

Most owls are bought when they're fledglings, that way, the birds have more time to adjust to their owners and so that they can be trained more effectively, but Hedwig was an older owl. Harry had considered writing a note so that she could deliver it, too see her abilities, but he didn't have anyone to write to. He also didn't want her making any long distanced journeys to the one person he did know well enough outside of the Coles, so Harry had just watched Hedwig flit about his room.

Her wing span had been so magnificent, though, that Harry had thought it a shame to lessen her flying by keeping her in his room. As large as the room was for Harry, he knew that the space was nothing for a bird whose natural home was the seemingly infinite skies, and so, in his excitement, he had opened the doors of his window and let Hedwig soar in the greater outside. She had landed on Harry's shoulder momentarily to nip at his ear affectionately, and then with a whoosh of her wings, she had flown out into open.

Of course, that had been around twilight, and now everything was shadowed in the absence of the moon's light, and while Harry was confident in Hedwig's aptitude, he was still worried. It didn't happen very often, not at all really, at least not since the era of the Dark Lord had ended, but Harry still heard the stories of when owls were killed so messages could be intercepted.

He scoured the black skies.

Again there was no sign of Hedwig, and now that knot in Harry's stomach began to writhe. The knot had been there ever since Mr. Cole had told Harry that he, Alex, and Edward were to be transferred to Hogwarts, but waiting for Hedwig to appear was exacerbating it, as was the thought of dinner that was waiting for Harry later.

Harry had listened to all the reasons Mr. Cole (and that other man Harry didn't like so very much) had given him. Why they were moving... Why they were transferring schools... The expectations Mr. Cole had for Harry, Alex, and Edward...

Their duties...

That was when the tightening had begun to fester within the pit of Harry's stomach. The transfer felt like a precursor to Harry, and he had suspected that Mr. Cole had received startling news. If he hadn't, Mr. Cole wouldn't have asked his two sons and Harry to relocate, and Harry was sure that the topic of dinner conversation would be along the same lines. With such a gnawing feeling within him, it seemed the very atmosphere around Harry was growing taut in the wake of a gathering storm. Harry didn't like it at all, and so he wished fervently for Hedwig's return.

Harry was about to turn around so that he could find some means to distract himself, when a dark splotch against the sky appeared. Harry narrowed his eyes and watched the swift, small cloud. It moved towards him, but too quickly for just a cloud. His heart thudded from uncertainty. He wanted it to be his owl, but what if it was something else?

As it neared, Harry could see shapes on the side of the solid speck moving up and down then fixing themselves straight out. Harry breathed with relief. It was Hedwig making her way back to him, and that tension in his stomach released.

"Thank Merlin!" Harry exclaimed as he stepped aside to let Hedwig in. She swooped in gracefully and landed upon the footing of Harry's bed. "I was beginning to think I'd have to send Alex's owl to find you," Harry said, more to himself. Hedwig turned her head and fixed Harry with her amber eyes. She then hooted and ruffled her feathers, and Harry suspected she was saying something along the lines of, "I need no search party! Thank you very much!"

Harry pulled the doors of his window shut and turned the latch so that it locked with a click. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his messy hair. He should be more confident in his owl. It seemed that she needed no training at all. Harry glanced over at his owl and found her preening herself as if she hadn't just worried him for the past couple of hours. Harry smiled. He was really elated he had bought the owl, even if she was proving to be rather independent, but Harry thought that that wasn't really such a bad thing. Better than some of the brainless owls people kept.

Harry scratched absentmindedly at the scar on his forehead as he walked over to the seat of his desk. He plopped down and began to drum his fingers across the cherry wood desk, as periodic, soft hoots came from his owl.

Wonder if it's time to get ready, Harry thought to himself as he turned to look at an ornate clock that sat upon his book shelf. It was a bit lavish for his taste, it being made of gold and all. All he needed was something to tell him the time, but nothing could ever be simple with the Coles. The gold clock told him that it was twenty minutes to seven, and Harry winced.

Twenty minutes until Mr. Cole arrived.
Harry's suspecting had been correct...

... but underestimated.

Once Harry, Edward, and Alex had sat down for dinner, joined soon after by Mr. Cole, the topic of dinner conversation had quickly gone from superficial questions about everybody's day and Diagon Alley and straight to the real business, and Harry found it hard to swallow his food. His throat had clamped up.

Harry couldn't believe what he was just informed. What is Mr. Cole thinking? he thought as he stared at his barely eaten roasted duck.

"We have to do what?" Harry heard Edward cry. He was sitting across from Harry, and looking every bit as pale and clammy as Harry himself felt. His brows were knitted together and his mouth was hanging slightly open, as Edward directed all his disbelief towards his father who sat at the head of the table.

The man did not respond at first.

Harry could feel the tension growing in Alex who sat beside him. His hands, which had been resting in his lap before Mr. Cole had begun talking, were now clutched in tight fists, the knuckles white. Harry knew Alex, too, was unnerved.

"Do not pretend to have not heard me, my son," came a smooth, deep voice. Harry glanced up towards the end of the table where the speaker sat much too composedly for his liking. The man hadn't even looked up at his son when he had responded, but had continued to neatly saw into his food with a delicate precision only years of proper etiquette had furnished.

Harry felt a ripple of anger mix with the sickening dreading.

Mr. Cole, when one looked at him, was a man of apparent distinction. His dark hair was streaked with lighter hues of grey, and it was always parted to the side in such a way that the grey bands made him look more eminent than aging. The man's beard stayed trimmed, and his mustache slightly curled giving one the sense of polished elegance. He always wore dark robes, and though the fabrics were devoid of any elaborate designs, they were rich appearing nonetheless. And pinned to the robes at all times was a crest of two entwining Rowan branches encircling a small red orb.

"How can you demand all that of us?" Edward asked, his voice simmering with a rage Harry knew was fully justified. Edward was lifted off of his seat with his hands pressed hard against the dark wood of the table. Mr. Cole picked up his wine glass, moving it in a circular manner, the white liquid swiveling and sloshing against the sides.

"I'm not asking the unreasonable Edward," the man replied coolly. Harry was used to Edward and Mr. Cole clashing. Though they were father and son, they couldn't be more completely different.

"You're asking for the impossible!" Edward exclaimed, banging his hands upon the table.

"You will not speak to me as such, do you hear me?" Mr. Cole said, his voice a mere cold whisper. There came a strange sense over the

room, like static collecting over their heads, and everyone stilled. Edward, who had been about to say something, shut his mouth immediately. Harry knew where that feeling came from and locked his eyes on Mr. Cole.

Every time Mr. Cole used his magic to impose his will on Edward and Alex, something in Harry shouted to be unleashed, as if he wanted to match the ferocious power he knew Mr. Cole had.

... but he never did. He knew better.

Harry heard the creak of wood, and he saw Edward sit down, defeated.

"I heard you, sir," Edward said, lowering his gaze, "I just... can't believe it," Edward said, his reply silencing by the end of it. Harry watched as Edward's head dropped, his face concealed by shadows brought on by the dimly lit room.

"I can understand that," Mr. Cole responded, his composure regained, as he dabbed at the corners of his mouth with a dark red napkin, and Harry didn't think he did at all. "But you know my expectations." The statement was spoken with such a unyielding finality that made it seem as if there was no room for retorts or rebuttals. A tangible quiet covered the four entirely, and Harry tried to think of something to respond with.

"We're only twelve," came a quiet voice. Harry looked up and over, astonished. That had been Alex. Alex never, or very rarely ever, questioned his father. Mr. Cole's quick turning to Alex told Harry that the man was just as surprised as Harry. Even Edward looked up with shock.

"What was that, Alexandre?" Mr. Cole demanded darkly. Alex visibly shuddered, and Harry thought he wasn't going to repeat himself, he suddenly looked very ashen. But Alex looked up nonetheless, his expression fixed.

"We're only twelve," he said again with more determination. Mr. Cole merely looked at his son, his dark eyes betraying nothing. Harry wouldn't have been able to match such a stare, but Alex held firm. Seconds blurred into minutes, and still Mr. Cole stared and said nothing. Harry hated this. It was a silent test of wills, a contesting

used by disputing family members, more commonly by parents and their children, to see who had the stronger resolve. It was a favorite of Mr. Cole's, and Harry had seen him break Edward and Alex with it time and time again. Harry suspected Mrs. Cole had forbade the man from using it on Harry, since he wasn't his true son or anything.

Finally... Alex looked away, and Mr. Cole smiled, almost imperceptibly.

"When the new term begins," Mr. Cole began, his tone monotone, as he placed his knife diagonally upon his plate, his fork placed vertically atop that, "You three know what is to be done." As soon as he finished, there came a muted snapping sound and wisps of smoke, and a tiny house elf wearing a shabby, moth eaten curtain as a toga appeared. Without a question or word, the tiny house elf removed Mr. Cole's plate from the table, and once the house elf had it securely within its grasp, it disappeared with another snap.

A silence filled the room, and the Harry thought he could hear the resounding crack of the house elf's departure resounding about the hollow room. Light played across everyone's features, as the fire in the deep hearth flickered, casting a eerie look over everything and everyone. Mr. Cole seemed content, even victorious, in the silence, and Harry wanted so badly to leave. Edward had adopted his position of earlier, dropped head and slack posture, while Alex sat rigidly.

Harry had remained taciturn during the... one-sided discussion, and he now wished he had spoken up, though he didn't know what he should have said. He just didn't like to think about what the three of them would have to do once a new life at Hogwarts began. He felt it wasn't fair. He had known a little about what was asked of them, but these new tasks...

Harry's stomach knotted so tightly that he thought he was going to loose what supper he had managed to get down.

"You boys should finish your dinner," Mr. Cole quipped suddenly, and Harry noted that not one of them made a move for their forks. Edward shut his door behind him, and found only a small bit of satisfaction when it clicked to lock.

Edward had known that dinner wouldn't have been pleasant. With all that had happened within the last month, Edward was sharp enough to know that things were bound to be hectic. He knew his father would never do just anything without a reason, like their relocation, but he also knew that his father sometimes reacted with too much promptness.

And dinner proved just that.

Edward flung himself on his oversized bed, and buried his face within it's covers. Why should they be the ones to carry out these ridiculous tasks? They were just kids! If father and the others were so concerned then they should be the ones to do it!

Edward snorted at the thought. Where had that backbone been earlier? he asked himself ruthlessly.

Edward had always prided himself on being someone with balls. Those like him did... or should, but it was always a different story when it came to his father. The man was merciless. Memories of when Edward was younger told him how cruel the man could be. Why should Edward expect anything else? Especially when it came to things like those encompassing the dinner conversation?

He made a sound in the back of his throat, but it was muffled by the fabrics of the bedding. Edward felt agitated, pressured, and... dare he admit, scared shitless.

Edward could feel his heart pulsating rapidly, just the mere thought of they were asked to do.

He tried to concentrate on breathing in order to calm himself down. As he filled his lungs with a deep breath, he was bombarded with a barrage of scents. He smelled the musk of his favorite cologne, the faint burning of sandalwood from the fire he knew he was father was sitting next to one level below, and the scent of day old rain pooling under the trees of the forest. He could also smell the staleness of the house.

The house had been uninhabited for a long time, not since his great, great Grandfather Cnaeus Cole had owned it, and that had been over three hundred years ago. So, the house had just sat on the small clearing, and dust had collected and the air had stagnated.

He hated this house.

About the only thing redeeming about the cold mansion was the creepy forest that encased it, and Edward was just itching to go back in. The last time he had gone into it, Harry had been so nervous, that they hadn't gone too deep within the woods. Edward had been disappointed to cut the adventure short, but he also hadn't wanted to upset Harry who had continuously tensed up at nothing at all. Edward was sure that they would go into the forest again. Alex had been curious too, and Edward knew Harry wasn't the kind of person to not fully inspect his surroundings. Besides, there had just been so many enticing scents and a feel of... wild that had gone straight to Edward's blood.

There came a knock on his door, and even knowing who was, he was still slow to answer it. He heaved himself up and off the bed, though, and trudged to the door. He opened it, and without even acknowledging his guest, he went back to his bed to resume his earlier position.

"I'm returning the book I borrowed," came the voice from the doorway.

"Mmm..." Edward replied through the pillow he was burying his face into. He knew it wasn't to return a book that had brought his brother to his room. Edward sensed the hesitation in his brother, as Alex lingered in the entrance. Edward picked himself up slightly, supporting his weight on his arms, and he watched his brother fidget from side to side awkwardly.

"We'll be alright, you know," Edward sighed noncommittally. Alex looked up, and his expression conveyed that he wasn't at all convinced. Edward didn't try to persuade his brother otherwise, not when he felt so reluctant himself. Alex wavered just a second before stepping fully into the room. Edward watched as Alex went over to his desk to lay the book upon it, and Edward noticed that it was a book he had leant Alex months ago and had completely forgotten about. He suspected that Alex had too until just this moment.

Edward laid his head upon his pillow again and closed his eyes. He followed his brothers movements by listening to Alex's shuffling feet,

and soon he felt the bed shift slightly as Alex took seating at the edge of his bed.

Neither one spoke. Edward continued to breathe and Alex never stirred. Minutes passed, and only the howling wind passing through the small gaps in the windows' frames were heard. It was hard for Edward to forget his tension when his brother sat so stiffly next to him.

"Alex... Really. We'll be alright," Edward tried again, though his voice caught in his throat and ended too quietly to be convincing.

"Of course we will be," Alex replied banally. Again, they grew silent, and just as their voices fell and dimmed, so did the light of sun and light in the room. No moon would take the sun's place, but that was just fine for Edward. He began to wonder at how the day had twisted from a fun adventure to Diagon Alley into a night of unease and foreboding.

"Hey... what made you speak up against father?" Edward asked, genuinely curious. Alex was too much his father's son sometimes, and it was that which made Edward feel bitter towards his brother at times. It was a rare thing for Alex to go against their father.

"... I don't know," Alex replied, and Edward knew his brother was regretting it. Edward frowned and kicked his brother.

"Ow! What the hell was that for?" Alex demanded, rubbing his side.

"Take pride in it," Edward said simply. Then he laughed. "You were my hero today!" Alex looked stunned for a moment but he returned Edward's smile and repaid his brother with a pinch on his upper leg. Edward laughed and bellowed, which made for a bizarre noise, and both brothers laughed uncontrollably.

After a while, the laughter lessened, and Edward rested his head again.

"Harry looked really sick at dinner," Alex said softly after a moment. Edward picked his head up a little to look at his brother from the corner of his eye.

He knew his brother too well sometimes.

"Yeah... I suppose he did." Alex nodded his head and fell silent again. Edward felt the pang of resentment towards his father renew. All three of them were asked to do the near impossible, but Edward wondered how much of it Alex could handle. Ever since he was little, Edward had to learn to adapt to crueller realities than his brother did. Though they were twins, Edward knew there were many things that separated them. His father's blatant favoritism of Alex had certainly strained their relationship, as well as other things, and Edward didn't think his brother could adjust as readily as maybe he or Harry could.

Edward was very aware of Harry's childhood, and that kind of thing isn't something that leaves people unchanged, whether it's giving them harsher views of the world or deep senses of distrust towards others, which Harry had multitudes of.

It was Alex who Edward suspected was going to struggle the most, and Edward avowed silently to look after his older brother.

With his silent promise, Edward felt the gloom of doubt and uncertainty lift slightly. He nuzzled into his blanket with a bit more ease, and after awhile, Alex, too, relaxed somewhat. Soon the two brothers were joined by Harry, and all three soon forgot their worries and troubles in a riveting game of exploding snap. Harry rubbed at his weary eyes that were watering from a combination of not blinking and poor lighting.

"Alright girl," he said, closing the book he was reading, "That's the last of it." Hedwig hooted and promptly buried her head under one snowy, white wing. Harry smiled, yawned, and decided he, too, should go to bed.

He made his way to it, flopped onto the mattress, got comfortable, and pulled the blankets up to his nose. His eyes already felt heavy, so it was no trouble in keeping them closed so sleep could claim him.

As apprehensive as Harry was now, he knew he could handle the coming days if Edward and Alex were there.

Harry exhaled deeply and rolled over to a better position. Sleep crept at the back of his mind and took its slow hold on him. Suddenly Hedwig hooted loudly. Harry opened his eyes abruptly and

bolted upright. He glanced about his room, but... nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Harry only found Hedwig staring at him unwaveringly.

"What is it girl?" Harry asked, his voice scratchy. She blinked her eyes twice, the filmy lids gliding over her golden eyes. It took Harry a moment, but once he realized what his owl was telling him, he snorted. "Alright, alright!" He laughed as he removed his glasses. "They're off!" He laid them on his bed stand. Hedwig cooed softly, a soft approval Harry suspected, and her head disappeared under her wing again.

Harry shook his head, laid back down, and pulled the covers over his head. It didn't take long for Harry's head to filled with half formed dream-like visions, and soon the room was filled with quiet coos of a bird and the heavier breathing of a sleeping boy.

A/N: Jeezy Chreezy! That was one overdue update! I am very sorry... A lot happened, and I found I couldn't write. Don't know if that's a viable excuse or not, but... Ah well. Hope you guys enjoyed, and I hope not to take as long on the next chapter.

Chapter 3: So It Begins

The rest of the week had passed by much too quickly for Harry, and before he knew it, September 1st had rolled right in. All that week, there had been so much commotion that even all the house elves had been seen dashing about the manor. Everyone had been running around, trying to find the last bit of stuff they wanted to bring with them to Hogwarts, and presently, three big trunks and two owl cages sat abidingly by the door.

Harry was the only one who was completely packed and ready, if not a little reluctant, to leave for the scarlet train. He sat on his trunk, feeding Hedwig some bits of toast through the cage, as he watched Edward and Alex dart here and there. Another owl, a mottled grey-white barred owl belonging to Alex, looked longingly over at the oblivious snow owl and hooted enthusiastically. Harry would try to feed the barred owl- Alex had named him Henry- as well, but every time Harry stuck his fingers in the cage, the bird would try to bite them off.

So Harry had given up on that last bit, and fed his own, appreciative bird instead while he gazed about the foyer. He wondered whether once he arrived at Hogwarts-his stomach knotted again- if he would prefer this dark abode instead. The hallway he occupied was cavernous, even for a hallway. The walls were a dark, faded blue and portraits upon portraits of faces resembling that of Mr. Cole stared down at Harry arrogantly. Some would sneer if Harry caught their eye, while others would shoot off into neighboring portraits to, no doubt, gossip about the unruly boy sitting undeservedly in their grand estate.

But what about Hogwarts?

True this place had so far been unwelcoming in many senses- A picture of fat man wearing dark, red robes began asking Harry if he was the Coles' new servant- but Harry questioned if the students at Hogwarts would accept him and if he would find any solace there. It was hard to explain to people (pure-bloods and muggle-borns alike) in a lineage- concerned world that he didn't know his parents. The little he did know was that they were wizards, that their names were Lily and James Potter, and that Harry probably had messy hair like his father...

But Harry rarely asked about his parents, and no one ever took the initiative to tell him anything anyway. It wasn't that Harry didn't want to know. At times when he was by himself, he'd tried to imagine what his parents were like, what they might have looked like, how they might be if they were still with him... how he'd be if they were still with him, but... Harry didn't want to seem ungrateful.

The Coles were his family. They were his only family, and they had taken him in as one of their own. Harry had never felt wanted before, and it was that feeling alone which stopped Harry from asking about his parents.

Besides, for all Harry was concerned, the Coles had saved him! Without them, he'd still be with that other family, the ones that had looked at Harry as if he was the disgrace of the entire world, the ones that looked at Harry as if he was filth... and dangerous. If it weren't for the Coles (and Mr. Lupin, too), he'd probably still be locked up under that staircase...

Harry shuddered then with a mixture of despair and anger.

He never wanted to return to that place. Never. In that house, Harry had always felt as if he needed to suppress... whatever it was that made the odd things happen around him. That was, of course, before he'd been told he was a wizard, but he still remembered the horrified expressions of that family whenever he had had an... outburst...

Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his finger, and he pulled his hand back instinctively. There was no wound, just a red mark. He looked up to find Hedwig's golden eyes focused on him. Harry shook his head and smiled.

"Sorry girl," he told her, reaching into the cage after breaking off more bits of toast. "Don't pay any attention to me," he said as he stroked her head.

Just then Alex walked into the hall- the portraits already looked more approving- carrying an unraveling bundle which Harry didn't recognize.

"Alex!" came Edwards's voice through the adjoining room. "Have you seen my luminos?"

"What do you need those for?" Alex shouted.

"What's that?" Harry asked as Alex stepped up to his trunk. The older boy knelt down and started fiddling with the lock, being careful, Harry noticed, not disturb the contents in the bundle. Alex looked over at a confused Harry warily.

"It's something Father gave me this morning," he said carefully. Harry knew the older boy wouldn't say anything more, so he watched as Alex opened his trunk and placed the bundle upon his other things gently. Harry wondered what it could possibly be because if Alex needed to be that careful with it, what would happen once it was loaded onto the train?

"Alex, I really want those- Say, what's that?" asked Edward as he stepped into the foyer. Alex said nothing but gave his brother a knowing glance over his shoulder. Harry observed as Edward's expression went from curious to understanding to guarded uncertainty. Being the only one to not know what it was, Harry felt a little agitated, but because he wasn't a blood heir to the Coles, such secrets were commonplace.

It was one of the many things that peeved him about pure-blood traditions.

Harry didn't bother to press the matter knowing that if his two friends could tell him, they would, so he continued to feed Hedwig as if he wasn't at all the least bit interested.

"You're luminosare in the undercroft... I think on top of one of the shelves," Harry supplied as Hedwig nipped at his fingers greedily. Edward gave an awkward 'thanks' before dashing off.

"Why do you need those things?" Alex called after him. When there came no reply, Alex sighed and locked his trunk again. "Now he's just going to carry around useless baggage."

"He probably just doesn't know what to do with himself," Harry said as he scratched his owl behind her head- he had run out of toast.

"Yeah, but luminos? Harry, what's he planning to do? Play marbles the whole time?" Alex asked shaking his head. Harry was silent for a

moment. He, too, was questioning why Edward wanted his set of luminos seeing as how Edward hadn't played with them since he had first received them three years ago.

"I really think he's just looking for something to do 'til we have to leave," Harry said at last. Alex looked over at him quickly before turning to his owl.

"How are you- you know- about all this?" Alex asked him hesitantly as he fed his own bird a cracker. Harry took a moment to think about how he really felt. From time to time that morning, he felt a force slosh and whirl inside him. Harry knew that it was his magic doing that, and every time he felt it, he clenched his hands really tight and tried to will it back down.

Right now, his magic was only rumbling deep in his chest, and he couldn't really distinguish from his breathing it was so slight. The only thing that was prominent then was that knot.

"I guess like how you feel," Harry finally replied.

"What? Sick?" Alex asked, smiling tightly.

"We'll be alright," Harry told him after a moment. Out of the three of them, Harry really thought Alex was the most worried. He was sure that Edward was more outraged than apprehensive, but it was hard to tell with Edward sometimes. He, himself, just felt uncertain, like he didn't understand the point of it all, didn't know what it was he was getting into. That kind of thing was something Harry always had a hard time dealing with. Besides, some of the stories he had heard about- Harry shook his head, and the knot writhed.

"That's what Edward kept telling me," Alex said as he plopped down onto his trunk. Harry smiled over at him. "Ever the optimists, aren't you two?" Harry couldn't think of anything to say, so he just shrugged his shoulders and went on petting Hedwig.

"Well," Edward began, coming into the foyer, "I found them!" He held a small, plain box, the only embellishment being the logo 'LUMINOS by Gaius' Games and Puzzles.' Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Have all you need now?" Harry asked sliding Alex a meaningful glance.

"Merlin Edward! Must you bring all that rubbish?" Alex sighed as Edward stopped before his trunk.

"It's not rubbish!" Edward retorted indignantly, opening his trunk and placing the box within it. Harry noticed how packed the trunk was and was amazed to see Edward managing to cram even more stuff into it. "It's just a marble set," Edward muttered under his breath.

"If you say so, brother."

After Edward clicked the lock of his trunk closed, the room fell silent. Harry knew it was because of the inevitable (and rapidly approaching) departure they'd be making, but he still hated the silence that hung about the three of them. However, he didn't know what to say.

A little streak of pale, morning light streamed in through the windows flanking the entrance door behind Harry. Harry followed the line of the light as it trailed across the floor and up the side of the wall, ending in a needle fine point.

Someone cleared their throat.

"So... when are we supposed to be leaving?" It was Alex.

"Oh, I dunno..." Edward sighed, "Whenever Father deems it time."

"What's he doing now?" Harry asked.

"Conversing with the Earl... again," Edward answered, and Harry didn't miss the spite his tone carried. Harry couldn't blame Edward, not when he felt the same way towards the man.

The Earl was a friend of Mr. Cole's, or really, a man in the same line of profession as Mr. Cole, and the man would come to visit often. Especially ever since it was decided that Harry, Edward, and Alex would attend Hogwarts. Harry knew the Earl had had a say in that matter, and because of that, Harry didn't hold the man in the highest regards.

It wasn't just that, though; Harry also didn't like the way the man looked at him. Whenever the Earl came, and whenever he caught

Harry's eye, it was like there was a deep sense of distrust in the glance. Harry told himself he was just imagining things, but there were still times when Harry could swear the man was glaring at him.

"If that's the case then we'll be here awhile," Harry said.

"Fine by me," Edward snorted, and Harry gave him a sideways glance. "Come on Harry. Don't tell me you don't feel the same way," Edward said as he reclined against his trunk, closing his eyes.

"No, that's not it. It's just..." but he didn't know what he was trying to say. Edward peeked over at him.

"Just what?"

"Just... I was going to agree with you," Harry breathed. Edward sat up and reached over to Harry. Harry was expecting the consoling pat Edward often gave him and Alex, so he was surprised when Edward leaped over to him instead, locked his head in his arms, and delivered a most scalp-burning knuckle rub.

"Ow! Edward! Stop! Stop!" Harry cried trying to wriggle free as the top of his head began to burn a little.

"Don't giveme that look then," Edward said releasing his poor captive.

"Merlin, Edward! I feel like all my hair's gone," Harry seethed, tenderly touching the top of his head.

"Aw, you know that's not possible. Not with all that tangled mess you've got there!" Edward laughed.

"Edward..." Alex gently admonished with a look. Edward brushed it off by waving his hand nonchalantly.

"He's fine, Alex. Don't fret so much," Edward muttered, resting up against his trunk again.

"Fine?" Harry repeated incredulously. "Prat," he added, kicking Edward's trunk. It went sliding, and Edward's back thudded lightly against the floor. Edward looked stunned for a moment before

glaring at Harry. Harry smiled smugly, and Alex began laughing. Edward, after giving Harry a dark look, went to fetch his trunk.

"Who's being the prat now?" Edward asked, adjusting his trunk out of Harry's kicking range. Harry was about to comment when Mr. Cole came striding into the hall followed by a stout, short man with a trimmed silver beard and cropped silver hair.

The Earl.

Augustus Antares.

The Earl's pale blue robes fluttered slightly as he trudged behind the more elegant Mr. Cole. The two men stopped several feet before the group of boys, and Harry tried to appear disinterested... calm. The Earl said something to Mr. Cole at which Mr. Cole's eyes flickered over to Harry. Harry wasn't even sure if Mr. Cole had looked at him, it had happened so quickly, but Harry's back straightened nonetheless.

Mr. Cole nodded his head. He held out his hand, and the Earl grasped it firmly within his. Then the Earl bent one of his knees slightly so that he was in a kind of kneeling position. After he stood, Mr. Cole bowed deeply.

Harry watched the two wizards' sign of farewell. When greeting or departing, it was customary for the guest to show his/ her sign of gratitude. Kneeling was a display of being humble to the gracious host who extended an invite to their home. Then the host would bow to show that they were honored by the guest.

Alex had told Harry that now wizards just grasped hands for the exchange, but there was once a time when it was more customary to slit the palms and exchange blood as well...

Harry gulped a little at the thought, finding that tradition a little unpleasant and not to mention a bit... dark.

He was just appreciative that Mr. Cole didn't school Harry on pure-blood traditions as much as he did his two sons. Being raised to obey those who are also considered privileged, powerful, and rich-Being primed into ever-scrutinized stature... It sometimes felt beyond Harry. However, being that the Coles were his adoptive

family, he did have to act the part sometimes. Harry always felt ridiculous, but he tried his best- He did find some of the traditions fascinating.

But he'd probably have to use all his knowledge of pureblood formalities once he was at Hogwarts. It was almost certain...

There came a gruff cough above Harry. He looked up through the fringe that fell into his eyes, and saw the Earl standing above him. Harry scrambled up and did his best at a passable bow, but it was hard to do so when his back became so rigid in the presence of the stout man.

"I understand an important task has been left to you Mr. Potter," the Earl spoke in a guttural voice, and Harry tried to tell himself he really was only imagining the malice within the old man's tone.

"Yes, Sir Antares," Harry replied, still bowed. From the corner of his eye he saw Edward flex in outrage, but he caught his friend's eye and shook his head. Sometimes Edward's mouth got him in terrible trouble, and Harry didn't think that a brief encounter with the Earl was worth it.

"You must make sure to be ever wary, boy," the Earl replied, walking towards the door. "He is one of the most notorious." Harry felt himself straightened when he noticed the Earl was watching him with unmistakable distrust.

"Of course, I understand," Harry replied with a slight bow of his head. His neck almost didn't want to comply.

"Harry is well aware of the circumstances, I assure you Augustus," came Mr. Cole. "I have confidence in him."

"I'm sure you do," the Earl said. "Well, I'll be taking my leave now. Thank you again for the tea, Connell, and send my greetings to Rona."

"The pleasure was all mine, and Rona will be returning in four day's time. You may very well be able to tell her yourself," Mr. Cole replied lightly. Harry thought Mr. Cole's voice sounded slightly strained, like he, too, was tired of the Earl. The Earl chuckled, and it was a harsh laugh that made Harry wince.

"Yes, well, until then," and with that, the stout man left through the front door and out towards the dark woods, no doubt to apparate once he cleared the wards around the estate.

"Why doesn't he just travel by floo?" Edward asked. Alex came to stand beside Harry with that look on his face that meant he was worried. Harry smiled, trying to assure Alex. Alex returned the smile, but it was a slight one.

"The man has a theory that the ministries use the floo networks to transport Unfavoureds to prison. You know how suspicious he is of the ministries," Mr. Cole answered in his smooth tone.

"I thought he worked for them sometimes," Edward said.

"Only when need be, son," he replied, like it was a rehearsed and tired line. Then, in his ever composed manner, Mr. Cole turned to Harry, face stern. Harry was readying himself for a lecture upon seeing the man's expression. Perhaps he did something wrong or offensive in his gestures towards the Earl, and Mr. Cole was going to let him know. "Harry," he began-Harry braced himself, "I apologize for that." Harry blanked for a moment. "He should have known better than to discuss such matters so lightly." Harry shook his head.

"It's alright, sir," he replied, finding his thoughts again, and Edward snorted. Harry glared at the taller boy, but Edward wasn't paying attention. He was fiddling with his trunk again. Mr. Cole didn't say anything, but narrowed his eyes.

"Well, gather your trunks, boys," he said at last. "It's time to go," he announced.

The knot in Harry's stomach gave a lurch, causing him to swallow, but he nodded his head.

It was time.

Steam swelled before Harry and clouded his glasses.

As he wiped his lens, he sensed Alex and Edward coming to stand beside him. He fixed his glasses in place and ran a hand through his hair.

There were people all about. After passing through the brick barrier between the muggle train station and the wizards' one, Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, Harry, Alex, and Edward had their trunks taken away- Hedwig and Henry had been taken as well, and placed in the special compartment for the animals- and now they were all waiting to board the train gleaming red before them.

Well, not waiting to board, but waiting until the last minute to leave. None of them were in a hurry. They were now being brought so close to the source of their anxiety for the last several weeks, and Harry saw the grim unease in his two friends' faces.

The three of them had talked over all that they were asked to do last night. Huddled in Harry's room, they had tried walking through it all, laying out plans, building their confidence, but Harry didn't think anyone went to bed assured.

So here they were under the warm light of the afternoon, feeling swathed in the issuing steam...watching the people jostle about.

Harry watched as a ginger-haired woman kissed a lanky, freckled boy on his cheek. The boy, also red haired, made a face of embarrassment as he wiped the side of his face fiercely. Two other taller boys, twins it appeared, came beside the shorter one and began saying something one after another. Harry laughed in spite of himself as he watched the twins mess with who Harry believed to be their younger brother. It reminded him a bit of the two beside him.

"Want to make a race of it?" It took Harry a moment to realize someone had spoken.

"Of what, Edward?" Alex asked, and Harry noticed he was also watching the ginger-headed family. Harry was certain that it had to be the Weasley family, if the red hair and somewhat worn clothing was anything to go by- Harry remembered them from some of the pure-blood lessons he'd been told.

"Getting to the train- Want to make a race of it?" Edward repeated, squinting through the steam. Harry saw a familiar glint in Edward's

eye, and he felt himself smirking in response. Harry sometimes did have a competitive streak in him... But that was few and far between, and really only ever showed itself when it was Edward making the bets and stakes.

"You can't be serious-" Alex began to say.

"And GO!" Edward boomed, interjecting. Harry pushed off with his foot and began to run toward the train, already being poised for the race. He'd win this for certain! Although, he was surprised to see Alex to his left, who he was sure would have been at a disadvantage- what with Alex about to go on some speech about how ridiculous him and Edward were...

People darted out of the way, thankfully, looking outraged, as Harry dashed forward. Harry didn't know where Edward was. He didn't think he was in front of him, though, so he kept running. A momentary release, this running, where a warm breeze whipped at his fast and bigger concerns were left behind, if just for five seconds.

At last, he slapped a hand against the side of the train as a victorious whoop erupted from his mouth. Alex panted up next to him seconds later, while students and their families eyed the two like they were deranged.

"You know, I might have won..." Alex huffed, "...if I'd been given any warning!"

"Come on Alex!" Harry laughed. "Don't spoil my victory!"

"Your victory?" and Harry turned around. Edward was leaning against the side of a door of the train, smirking down at him. "Seems to me you finished a good six seconds after me," Edward laughed.

"You're lying," Alex said, peering up at his brother, wiping some perspiration from his brow.

"My, Alex, your doubt offends me," Edward sulked dramatically.

"Did you really?" Harry asked, stepping onto the train. Harry wouldn't really be surprised. Edward was amazingly fast, but Edward told Harry that wasn't exactly unique. Still... Harry was sure he had won. Edward was about to respond when one of the red-haired twins

suddenly popped up behind Harry from the aisle as if he had apparated there. Alex, just stepping onto the train, jumped from the sudden appearance of the boy.

"That he did! Saw him win, didn't we Fred?" the one said, as his twin came up behind him.

"Too true, George. Pulled way ahead, he did," the other finished. The two boys, freckled-face like their brother, grinned down at Harry. Harry sighed, and ran a hand through his tangled mop of hair now slightly damp from sweat.

"Fine then! Victory's yours!" Harry relinquished grudgingly to Edward.

"What? You're not going to follow your own advice about not spoiling victories then?" Edward asked, grabbing Harry's head and locking it in his arms. Still tender from earlier, Harry began to protest. "Then say I am the true champ! The one and only victor and no one rivals me!" Edward laughed, putting his knuckles to Harry's head.

"Alright! Alright! Just let go," and Harry pulled free. Harry was just trying to "fix" his hair when one of the twins bellowed out a cry.

"Oh no, George!" one sobbed, wrapping an arm around his brother's shoulder and letting his head drop into his free hand.

"I know, brother. More twins," the other responded, patting his brother on the back.

"I thought it'd be okay when those Patil girls showed up, but now we have these two to worry about," Fred said, jabbing a thumb over at Edward and Alex. Edward bowed as if he'd been complimented while Alex furrowed his brows in confusion and looked to Harry for some means of clarification. Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Names are Fred and George, by the way," one said as they pointed to themselves. Harry thought it was George who did the introduction. "Always nice to meet a couple of firsties!"

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, extending his hand, ignoring the bit about him being a first year. Harry thought he saw something pass between the Weasley brothers, like a glance or a tenseness. He had been around twins long enough to know when something was being

told but left unsaid, but Harry didn't know what it was. Perhaps it was because his last name was Potter and not Cole, and the Weasley twins had assumed he was Edward and Alex's brother. Harry was a bit puzzled, but brushed it off.

Knowing they were pure-bloods, he bowed his head slightly when one of them grasped his hand- it was Fred. "I am honored to meet two sons of Merlin," Harry said formally. He saw Edward quirk an eyebrow from the corner of his eye.

"Yeah... Nice to meet you, too," George said slowly, like he was the one shaking hands with Harry, as he, too, raised one eyebrow.

Harry felt his cheeks heat slightly as the twins went to shake hands with Alex and Edward.

Harry watched as the two sets of pure-bloods twins greeted one another- neither exchange as formal as Harry had made his. It occurred to Harry then that Hogwarts would be brimming with pure-bloods. Besides the Weasleys, there were so many others, and he listed all the names in his head he could remember- Mr. Cole had spent a particularly lengthy amount of time drilling Harry on the families, but Harry was never really interested in all that. However, Harry now wasn't sure when the right time to use them was. It was unnecessary with the Weasley twins, perhaps, but would that be true of other families?

If that was the case, then Harry would just have to better read people- try to gauge when to perform and when not to so that he didn't look like a right git. There would surely be countless tests on his knowledge of the customs- Harry thought of some of the purebloods attending the school. If that meant just risking Harry's honor, then he would not feel so pressured, but those tests would also reflect upon the Coles' reputation... Harry couldn't tarnish their respectability.

"Oy! Harry!" A finger snapped under Harry's nose, and Harry looked up, then realizing he had been absorbed in his thoughts. Edward was looking at him with an arched brow.

"Yes?" Harry asked.

"Fred and George here were just introducing their sister," Edward replied, and Harry noticed for the first time a short girl standing beside the Weasley twins. She had shoulder length hair- red, of course- and big, brown eyes. She stood slightly behind her two older brothers, and Harry had the inkling that she was a very shy individual. "Her name's Ginny," Edward announced.

"Hello, Ginny," Harry said, again extending his hand. He wouldn't be so ceremonial this time. She looked at it for a moment before holding out a shaking hand to Harry. Harry smiled and took it within his own.

"I'm Harry," he said, not feeling it necessary to say his last name again. She nodded her head, and Harry felt a small pull in his grasp. He released her hand, and it fell quickly to her side.

"Don't mind her, Harry," said one twin- Harry thought it was Fred.

"She's just terribly shy," George finished, laying a hand on his sisters' head.

"Probably just had a run in with our Neville," Fred guessed, shaking his head. Harry exchanged looks with Alex and Edward quickly. Neville Longbottom...

"We think she fancies him," George whispered to Alex.

"I do not!" the tiny girl bellowed, surprisingly loud, as her face became very flushed.

"Alright! We don't think you fancy him," Fred sighed.

"We know you do," George said with an air of sympathetic understanding. For a moment, there was a dangerous glint in the girl's eyes, and Harry was certain her fingers were itching towards an unseen wand tucked in her robes. However, the moment passed, and in a huff, she spun around and mumbled exasperatedly, "Brothers!" She turned back around.

"He's not even here!" she huffed. "I didn't see him with Ron- Did you?" And with that, she left.

Fred and George looked at each other, and the both shrugged.

"Poor Ginny, doesn't even know-" George began.

"-that she fancies our boy Neville," Fred finished.

"Oh, to be young," the twins chorused.

"So... you two know Neville," Edward asked casually. Harry didn't know if it was just from running earlier and the heat or Edward's sudden question, but he felt beads of sweat trickle down his temple. The twins looked at one another, and again, something passed between them.

"The question is, though..." George began.

"Who doesn't?" Fred concluded. Edward chuckled lightly and scratched the side of his face sheepishly.

"Yeah, that's true, but- I guess what I meant to ask is... if he's like all they say he is," Edward said hesitantly. Harry knew this ploy because he knew Edward so well. Harry even knew the twins were asking if Edward was being sincere- their guarded expression saying everything- but Harry doubted they could find any sort of guile in Edward's question. Seemed the twins were a bit protective of Neville.

"Well," George began, looking at his brother, "he's very..." but he trailed off just as a girl with short red hair tried to pass by the group of five boys. She mumbled a "pardon me" as Harry moved aside for her.

"- unassuming," Fred finished when the girl disappeared down the aisle. Edward nodded, arching a brow thoughtfully, while Alex remained still beside him, looking off at the waving crowd surrounding the train instead.

"Bet he's a favorite, eh?" Edward asked playfully. The twins smiled, but it was only half way.

"Not really," Fred said. "You sometimes forget he- well- finished off You-Know-Who." Fred finished a bit more quietly than he had started. The heat was becoming a bit dizzying, and it made Harry's forehead tingle a bit with irritation.

"But Snape sure acts like a royal git towards him," George added after a pause, clicking his tongue his disapproval. Harry saw Alex stiffen drastically. "Watch out for him, though, because he really just hates everyone." Fred shook his head then.

"Unless, of course, you're one of his precious Slytherins," Fred said, a bit contemptuously. Harry looked catiously over at Edward, feeling they may have stumbled into fragile territory. Best not ask anymore. The only sign Edward gave of acknowledging Harry was a slight bow of the head. Luckily, they didn't have to find a way of diverging the conversation.

"Goodness, Fred," George suddenly exclaimed. "Looks like mum's going to strangle poor ickle Ronniekins."

"Dear me, suppose we should save him, then?" Fred sighed, seeing what George was. Harry looked behind him and grinned. It looked like Mrs. Weasley, with tears streaming down her face, was squeezing the very life out of the Weasley twins' younger brother.

"But whose to say she won't try that on us?" George asked dangerously. Fred paused for a moment, while Harry was struggling between amusement, pitying the poor red-haired and red-faced boy, and something else that made his throat tighten a little.

"Too true," Fred said. "Besides, be a terrible shame and all if we were to fall to such a fate." George nodded his head.

"I know what you mean, brother- being that our furtures are so prospective," George said with a deviant glint in his eyes.

"Ah well," the twins sighed in unison.

"We knew him well," George said, saluting his brother who had grown slack in his mother's arms as if he was waiting to ride out the storm.

"Let's go find Lee then," Fred said. "Let us know if you all ever need help with anything!" Turning to Harry, both the red-headed twins gave a wink, and with a nod, they turned and made their way down the packed aisle, leaving their brother to fend for himself, it seemed.

"Guess we should try to find a compartment, too," Alex suggested after awhile, rubbing the back of his neck. Harry shook his head. The meeting with the twins had been interesting, if not a little random, and Harry hoped all his encounters with the people at Hogwarts were along the same lines. Just then, the train whistle blew, signalling everyone to board the train.

"Before they're all filled, that is," Harry said, watching as the Weasley boy broke free of his mother's embrace at last. At that, Edward began ushering his brother forward by nudging him in the back.

"I can walk on my own, you know," Alex said, trying to walk while being shoved against the torrent of students in the aisle.

"I think he's trying to use you as a shield," Harry chuckled, walking behind the brothers.

"Of course he is," Alex muttered, almost colliding into a short boy with blond, curly hair and a camera. The boy staggered a bit, but it looked like he was too busy trying to peek into every one of the compartments, his camera poised and ready at his eye, to be bothered by the three boys.

After some time of searching, towards the very end of the train, where the crowd of prowling students had ceased and where almost every compartment door was shut, they chanced upon an empty one. The three piled in, and after shutting the door behind them, they collapsed soundlessly into the seats- Alex and Edward on one side and Harry on the other.

No one spoke.

Harry could still hear many goodbyes being called out from both inside and outside the train. He even saw Fred and George's mother, her eyes now red and puffy from tears, outside the compartment window as she waved to the train. Harry sighed and fell further back into his seat, feeling some unnamed emotion that made him want to bury his head.

What was it? Envy? Bitterness?

Harry peeked out the window, and the ginger-haired lady blew a kiss to her unseen children.

Longing?

Harry shook his head and told himself to stop being so childish. Mrs. Cole was away tying up all the remaining loose ends from moving, meaning she couldn't be here, and Mr. Cole- Well, Mr. Cole didn't attend such things. Besides, if Alex and Edward didn't get upset about such things, why should he?

Harry nodded as if in confirmation.

Soon, there came a low rumbling sound, followed by another shrill of the train whistle, and Harry felt dull vibrations beneath his feet that seemed to mix and churn his stomach as the view outside the window began to move slowly past. The train had started.

Fully dressed in his school robes after an older student had informed Harry's compartment that they'd be arriving soon, Harry waited.

Everything was dark outside the window, and it only intensified the foreboding within him. Alex, after awhile, had settled into reading a book, while Edward was still munching on the candies the trolley lady had brought them hours ago. Harry, along the whole trip, had just sat and watched the scenery beyond the window flash past him in blurred hues of green and blue.

But now the train was slowing down- Harry could feel it- and the outside was too dark to see out of. He stared vaguely at the shadowed reflection of himself within the glass, instead, trying to will himself to calm down. He really didn't think he'd become this nervous. He felt his palms clamming up, and for the past hour, his scar had been irritating him.

Not only that, but Harry thought his magic was... raging. Like it was trying to push through to the surface of him. Harry didn't like that feeling at all. It really did make him feel like he was dangerous, just like those people had told him he was when his magic had exploded out of him when he was younger...

This feeling- it was why Harry had once tried to bury his magic deep inside him- had buried it when he was younger, before he had even known that it was his magic and not just some... abnormal power.

Harry remembered then that all this wouldn't be just a one time ordeal, his and Edward's and Alex's tasks. This wasn't just something that happened once after gaining the courage to plunge forward. This was something that would spread out during all his years at Hogwarts...

The scar on his forehead was flaming now, and Harry sucked in a quick gasp of air.

"Harry?" Alex had abandoned his book and was switching over to sit beside Harry while Edward looked up from his chocolate frog card.

"I'm alright," Harry breathed, rubbing his head. He was lying, but he didn't want to worry his two friends. Alex's hand came up but stopped just short of actually touching Harry's forehead.

"You don't look alright. It's really red, Harry," Alex whispered. "Did you scratch it again? And you're really pale." A cold cloth was suddenly pressed against Harry's scar gently. Harry looked over. Edward held a cloth against the inflamed blemish, and Harry found it very soothing. It was freezing as if it had been filled with ice, but it didn't sting. Harry knew that Edward had spelled the cloth, and he felt grateful. He just wondered where Edward had gotten the cloth from.

Harry held the cloth in place as Edward returned to his seat.

"You'd think that thing became aggravated every time you're upset," Edward stated quietly to Harry.

"It's just a bad coincidence," Harry responded, already feeling the pain alleviate.

"You were thinking about it again..." Alex stated. Harry just bowed his head once in response. Edward sighed.

"Listen mate, we'll be fine. You'll be fine. We can do this. It's just like spying, right?" Edward said, trying to be encouraging.

"It is spying," Alex replied dead-panned, still watching Harry concernedly.

"Yes, I know... What I meant was that it's just a few reports here and there to Father. Nothing too extraordinarily difficult!" Edward tried.

"Because spying on former death eaters-" Alex started.

"Death Eater," Edward corrected hastily.

"Death Eater and supposed Death Eater apprentices won't be difficult," Alex reiterated sardonically.

"Well, of course it's going to be difficult, but we're here to help."

"Think about who was assigned to Harry," Alex said darkly, looking at his brother.

"I'm just tryin' to cheer Harry up," he replied defensively.

"And you're doing a fine job!" Alex retorted.

"What are you doing? Just hovering again!"

"I don't hover!"

"Then what are you doing?"

"I'm... making sure he's alright!"

Harry watched as the two brother's argued back and forth, and while the pain in his scar was evanesing, a prominent pounding was building in his head. Twins though they were, there were still occasions when Edward and Alex fought viciously.

He suddenly felt the train jolt to a stop. From the way Alex and Edward were going at it, though, Harry doubted they knew they had arrived. Harry also didn't think he'd could get a word in.

"...You were the one who stole my broom to use it as a pixie swatter! What happened to that broom, Edward? You let the them have it so that they could blow it up later!" Alex was practically yelling now.

"I didn't give it to them, you prat! I was outnumbered," Edward snapped. "Besides, it you hadn't left honey all over the damn place, they wouldn't have shown up!"

"Guys?" Harry tried to interject.

"Me? You were the one who wanted to catch one and see if we could sell it to Gibbons later!" Alex shouted.

"Alex? Edward!"

"That was a joke, Alex. Not my fault if you didn't understand my humor, you-"

"GUYS!" There was a spark of dark green light and a crackling noise like close-ranged thunder. Both Edward and Alex quieted instantly, two sets of wide, brown eyes falling unto Harry. Harry stopped completely.

What was wrong with him?

He needed to get himself under control! He hadn't had a magical outburst like that in years... Why now? Was it because of the anxiety within him? He closed his eyes.

That need... that feeling...

"Sorry," Harry mumbled, breath ragged. He rubbed his eyes like he was tired, but really he just didn't want to see Alex's and Edward's shocked faces. He didn't want to face his two friends. What if his magic had directed itself, by chance, at Edward or Alex? It had happened before...

Guilt burned within his chest like his scar did on his forehead. He must calm himself. Harry couldn't understand why he was becoming so agitated. True their tasks set for them now seemed more ominous than ever, but Harry didn't think he'd have his magic bursting out of him because of it!

Calm down! he told himself, trying to push his worries- his magic-down.

"S'okay mate," Edward said softly, after a moment. "It was us. We were upsetting you."

"Besides, no one's hurt," Alex added. Edward gave his brother a warning look, which Harry caught. It only worsened the guilt Harry felt.

Suddenly, the door to their compartment was pushed sideways, and a tall boy with curly red hair wearing a silver badge with an engraved "P" on it stepped in- a prefect.

"What was that just now?" he asked. He had a rushed tone about him, and he held his nose up in the air slightly as he pushed up his glasses. All three boys exchanged looks.

"It was nothing," Alex offered.

"We were playing a game of exploding snap," Edward clarified. Harry remained silent as the prefect's gaze fell on each of them in turn... disbelievingly.

"Exploding Snap?" he asked. "I've never heard it that loud before."

"Well, perhaps this compartment amplified the sound?" Alex supplied. The boy looked as if he was going to argue the matter when the train's whistle blew. Once it stopped, the boy stood for a moment like he was torn between finishing his intent and... going off to do whatever it was he was going to do.

"Just see that once you get off the train, to wait for the professors' instructions." He gave a last pointed look to all three of them, and just as abruptly as he had come, he left.

Harry was silent for a moment, thinking that had been a close call. He didn't want anyone to know he had had a magical... tantrum... He murmured a "thanks" to Edward and Alex, at which his friends just nodded their heads.

Noise filled the aisle outside their compartment as shadow figures filed past the tented window in their door. Alex and Edward rose and opened the door. Many students were walking past, expressions a blend of boredom, drowsiness, and nervousness. Harry stood to

leave with them, and as he passed Edward, he heard him mumble something about, "One more bloody Weasley..."

Harry followed Alex out and off the train where many other students, all in their black robes, were waiting. Try as he might to squelch the unbearable nausea within him- a mixture of anxiety and his restless magic- Harry found he couldn't. He tried to pierce the darkness and examine his surroundings, but the little town of Hogsmeade, where the train unloaded, was dimly lit. Only dark outlines of crowded buildings and the seldom outline of a wandering wizard or two could be seen to Harry.

"Well, suppose this is about it?" Harry heard Edward say, coming up beside him. Alex mumbled something, but Harry didn't catch it. Just then a familiar booming voice called out of the darkness as a giant silhouette of a man appeared telling all the first years to follow him. While Harry, Alex, and Edward weren't first years, they knew they had to follow them.

They still had to be sorted into the houses of Hogwarts.

And then everything would begin.

Chapter 4: A Sorting Feast and Riddles

Harry was awestruck by Hogwarts.

As Harry, Edward, and Alex had glided across the black lake in their tiny boat along with the first years, Harry had been intrigued by the black waters of the expansive lake beneath them, wondering what creatures inhabited it, but once the serrated outline of Hogwarts formed in the distance, Harry's focus was completely consumed by it.

The castle was enormous! Towers upon towers! Walls upon walls! Weathered, ancient, dark... Hogwarts was a venerable testament of wizarding history! Seeing it up close struck Harry in a way reading about it never had. For a moment, Harry had forgotten all his worries.

But standing in the golden lit Great Hall now, under the enchanted ceiling, surrounded by nervous, impatient first years and bored older students forced reality back into Harry. Edward stood at Harry's one side, looking calm, as Alex stood at Harry's other, biting his bottom lip a little. Harry breathed deeply out of his nose, the air rushing out sounding thin and unsteady.

Harry's eyes roved over the Great Hall, the four tables- each accompanied by a different banner atop- the faces sitting at the tables, the quivering crowd about him, the head table...

In the very center of the teacher's table was none other than Albus Dumbledore. Harry didn't know how to feel seeing the legendary wizard sitting calmly ahead of him. His beard was long and white, like his hair. Half-moon spectacles framed his unusually bright blue eyes which even at his distance, Harry noticed, and a serene smile played across his wrinkled face.

He didn't look extraordinary or note-worthy- Unless you considered his purple robes that caught the light in streaks when he moved. It made him look as if he was glowing faintly, actually, but still he looked just like an old wizard. A very old wizard.

Dumbledore. The head master of Hogwarts. The defeater of the Dark Lord Grindelwald...

Harry's eyes moved down the line of his new teachers. A lady in emerald robes with an aged face and features tuned to a strict

severity sat to Dumbledore's left. She wore her hair in a tight bun, and atop her head was the pointiest, black hat Harry had ever seen. This was Professor McGonagall, Harry knew.

Harry looked to McGonagall's left to where another witch sat. She was dressed all in black and looked utterly bored. One too many sorting ceremonies for her, it seemed. Next to her was another teacher and then another. Harry looked at all of them, his new teachers, considering their faces and trying to put names to them.

At the end of the table, and certainly hard to miss, was Hagrid. Harry was happy to note that Hagrid, the groundskeeper of Hogwarts, it seemed, still remembered him! Of course, even now, Harry had a searing pain in his back where Hagrid had patted him in excitement when they greeted each other beside the train. Hagrid caught Harry's eye and waved, his big hand flying almost into a stout lady who looked as if she had a few straggly weeds sticking out of her hat. Harry returned the greeting, and Hagrid beamed. One good point of Hogwarts, Harry thought happily.

The lady with the pointy hat stood and came around the table then. Most of the hall fell silent. She pulled forward a simple stool, and onto the stool, she placed a battered, brown hat.

So this is the Sorting Hat? Harry thought. Edward was smiling when he saw it- Harry had no idea why- while Alex just looked stiff, eyes glazed and looking far beyond the sorting hat. As she sat the hat down, what Harry had just thought was a poorly patched-up seam, ripped open and began to move like a mouth. Then a voice emerged from it.

It began to sing a tale of the four founders of Hogwarts. Harry already knew all about them from his studies with Mr. Cole. The hat sang of Godric Gryffindor: strong and courageous; Helga Hufflepuff: kind and loyal; Rowena Ravenclaw: true and wise; and Salazar Slytherin: cunning and ambitious- the four houses of Hogwarts.

Mr. Cole, during Harry's lessons on Hogwarts, had especially seemed to enjoy talking about the house of Ravenclaw. Harry wondered why that was, but never cared to ask. Sometimes it seemed that Mr. Cole especially directed those lectures about Ravenclaw at Alex. Maybe Mr. Cole thought that was the house for Alex...

Harry thought Ravenclaw would suit Alex very well, seeing as how clever and studious his friend was. Edward would do well in that house, too. Edward was wise beyond his time. Harry had always thought that, and it would be nice if his friends could be in the same house as one another. Harry didn't think he'd be put in Ravenclaw. While he never got poor marks at his old school, he wasn't very diligent and didn't usually undergo extra studies if he didn't have to. Not that he wasn't curious, it was just that Harry had somewhat been... taught to not act impulsively, and that sometimes translated into being a bit more lacked about things. No, he wouldn't go into Ravenclaw.

Thinking about it, Harry hadn't the slightest idea which house he'd be placed in, but he thought maybe he'd like Gryffindor. Mr. Lupin had told Harry that he had been a Gryffindor back in his day, had talked adamantly about the house, and Harry had always liked Mr. Lupin. But again, Harry doubted he would be. Bravery, courage, daring... Those were traits Harry knew he didn't have.

Hufflepuff wouldn't be bad, Harry thought. The house didn't have a record of glory or of fame- Slytherin has more of a reputation than Hufflepuff, bad as it is- but Harry thought that what the house stood for sat right with him. There was nothing wrong about being steadfast or kind, welcoming all who didn't belong in the other distinguished houses...

That probably be him, anyway.

Harry didn't know what to think of Slytherin, though. After all, that house was the one people said turned out Death Eaters left and right... or had turned out Death Eaters left and right- Harry forced himself not think of who was sitting just before him- and Mr. Cole had never spoken too highly about them. Looking at the Slytherins now, though, all Harry saw were echoing expressions of boredom and arrogance. It didn't quite match what Mr. Cole had told him.

And it felt odd to stare upon the Slytherins' faces and know what he'd have to do. There was just something so strange about it- something that he just couldn't place...

"First years!" McGonagall called. Her voice was just as stern as her expression, and Harry found himself paying attention immediately. "I

will read out your names in alphabetical order. Once I have done so, please come forward and take a seat," she gestured to the stool, "and then you shall be sorted into your houses. From her robes, the older woman pulled out a scroll of parchment.

"Ainsworth, Abigail," the professor read. A tall girl with braided blond hair stepped timidly forward. She hesitated just before she sat down, and then the hat was on her head. The object's mouth moved, but Harry couldn't hear what was said. There was a pause, and then...

"RAVENCLAW!" the hat shouted. The girl looked relieved as a chorus of applause erupted from one of the middle tables. She hobbled off as the professor began to read off more names.

Harry took the time to finish familiarizing himself with the teachers seated before him. Currently, Dumbledore was in an avid conversation with a short and slightly goblin-looking man whose head was barely visible above the massive table. To the right of the goblin-man was a professor with curly, blond locks and bright, white teeth, wearing one of the most showy robes Harry had ever seen, all sparkling gold and white.

Harry grimaced a bit. This man, Gilderoy Lockhart, was the professor of the Defense Against the Dark Arts. There was no mistaking that. Not when all the books Harry had purchased for the class had the man's face and name plastered all over the covers. Looking at the man, Harry wasn't confident the professor could teach much of anything- Lockhart was brandishing his wand carelessly as he talked at a lady who watched the wand nervously. Harry wondered if the man had even fended off a doxy in his life.

"Weasley, Ginevra," McGonagall read as only four children were left waiting to be sorted. Harry swiveled his focus behind him where Ginny had been standing all that evening. She looked ashen, and her big eyes grew even wider once her name had been called. She took a tentative step forward, paused, clenched her fists, and then committed herself forward and up to the stool.

She sat, and then the hat was over her head, concealing much of her face. The hat said something, and even though much of her face was hidden, Harry saw an unmistakable blush just under the brim. The hat laughed out loud, and still chuckling, it bellowed, "Gryffindor!"

The loudest applause that night resulted, mainly due to Fred and George who had stood to clap and bellow, making Ginny's faded blush rush back full force, and the Gryffindor table congratulated their newest member.

Then only Harry, Alex, and Edward remained. The knot wound tighter and tighter in Harry's stomach. And more than just the acid in his stomach was sloshing about wildly.

At this point in the sorting ceremony, the students at the tables looked ravished and as if they would like nothing more than for the whole thing to be done with so they could eat. Many were staring at the gleaming and empty plates on the tables longingly.

Just as McGonagall lifted the scroll again- Harry felt his mouth go dry- Dumbledore stood and cleared his throat. Harry's hands felt clammy again. Someone pushed their arm against his, the gesture almost unnoticeable. It was Alex. Harry looked up and found Alex watching him concernedly. Harry smiled tightly.

"Students!" Dumbledore called, surprisingly captivating despite the softness of the tone. "We have quite the unusual circumstance here!" The students, Harry noticed, appeared as if that wasn't anything new. "This year we have three new students with us-" At that, the students began to look at each other as if their headmaster had miscalculated. There had been way more than three sorted tonight- "Who have come to us all the way from America!"

All eyes pivoted to Harry and his two friends. Harry suddenly felt even more nervous. Why did they need an introduction? Harry was becoming a bit warm, like the tiny candles floating above were emitting more heat than Harry cared for.

"Please give a warm Hogwarts welcoming to our newest Second Years!" Dumbledore concluded with several claps- Hagrid joined in, too, only his sounded like claps of thunder- and then he sat back down. Incoherent whispers began to fill the hall like buzzing. McGonagall gave a sharp look around the hall and then read the very bottom of the parchment.

"Cole, Alex." After she called Alex's name, the whispers intensified. Even the table at the far end with the banner of a snake overhead,

the one table that had been silent all along, began to murmur amongst themselves. The Coles did have a reputation, Harry noted, that much was now completely obvious.

Alex walked forward, his gait rigid. Harry watched with acute determination as his friend went forward because he had to. This was it. They were officially becoming a part of this school, and Harry thought he could physically hear all those spokes and gears behind the instrument of Harry, Alex, and Edward's intentions beginning to grind.

Harry gulped as Alex took his place on the stool. McGonagall placed the hat on Alex's head, and the hall fell quiet again. In no time at all, the seam-mouth opened and shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!"

The Gryffindor table erupted into applause. Alex looked stunned, and he didn't move for a moment. It wasn't until Edward made a face at him, did Alex shake off his stupor and stumble toward the clapping and whooping table. As Alex sat, people stuck out their hands from all ends around him, and Alex shook them each in turn, looking completely overwhelmed. Harry smiled.

"Cole, Edward," came McGonagall's commanding tone through the cheers. Again, there came silence. Harry didn't know why they fell so still. There had been low thrums of voices during the sorting of the first years...

Edward stepped forward, and Harry was relieved to see the confident swagger Edward sometimes walked with. Even if Edward didn't feel it, he was making an effort to appear assured. Like his brother, Edward took his place on the stool, and like all the others, the sorting hat was put atop his head. It seemed more time passed before the hat spoke. It didn't shout the house name like with Alex, but was talking to Edward instead, like it had the first girl in the beginning.

Edward remained still, not showing any signs that the hat was speaking at all, and then finally...

"GRYFFINDOR!"

It seemed the Gryffindor table was already cheering before the hat had even spoken, probably having assumed the twin of their newest

member would also be sorted into their house. Alex looked immensely relieved as a genuine smile graced his features the first time that day.

Edward erected himself off the stool, made his way to the Gryffindor table, swagger in stride, and as he passed Harry, he gave him a wink. Harry just watched as his friend squeezed himself in next to his brother and an older Gryffindor girl, the Gryffindors complying willingly to make room. Edward shook hands with the Gryffindors as Alex clapped him on the shoulder a couple of times.

Edward was in Gryffindor too. That was good. If anything, Harry thought Alex needed his brother with him. It wasn't that Harry thought Alex couldn't manage without him, it's just that Edward would be there to reassure Alex. Harry also thought Edward needed Alex there, too, because there were those times when Edward's temper got the best of him, and Alex was one of the few people that could calm him down. Edward and Alex slowly stopped laughing and talking with the rest of their new Gryffindor peers and turned their attention to Harry. Harry smiled at them but knew it looked just as forced as it felt.

Harry turned back to face the front of the hall and swallowed hard.

It was his turn.

Professor McGonagall lifted her scroll one last time.

"Potter, Harry," she read. He took a step forward and...

Black eyes from the head table fixed themselves on Harry suddenly, the gaze piercing enough that Harry actually froze for a second. Harry didn't have to see this person to know he was suddenly being observed.

It was him...

Harry tried to make it seem as if nerves had gotten the best of him as he staggered on. He gritted his teeth at his stumble and made his way to the stool, all the while telling himself that the stab-like stare could not actually cut into him like it felt. The only reason Harry had been somewhat collected during the sorting ceremony was because

he was sure this person had been oblivious to his presence. Until now.

Oh Merlin, Harry gulped, his throat feeling too tight for breath.

The man with black eyes and the person Harry had tried to ignore all evening- The former Death Eater- The one assigned to Harry- Harry's task...

Severus Snape.

The man was sitting at the head table, at the very end, elbows resting upon the table, while his fingers laced before his visage, his black eyes glinting darkly from behind them. This man was the one Harry would have to watch- The man that Harry would have to send reports on. Harry had never felt so insecure because he knew that this man was the embodiment of terror for so many who lived through the Great War.

Harry shivered with undeniable panic as he sat on the stool.

No! He couldn't act any differently. He couldn't come all this way just to fail on the spot!

Before him, the sea of students wore expressions strange to Harry, especially some of those belonging to the Gryffindors, the Weasleys more so. The twins huddled together, and their prefect brother had stopped talking to one girl and had his eyes fastened to Harry. Even further down the table, the gangly boy and Ginny were talking, their eyes, too, on him.

Suddenly a dark line shrouded Harry's vision above, the floor and his feet being the only thing he could see, as the hat encased his head. Though the hall was silent before, under the fabrics of the hat, even the silence was muted.

Oh my, a voice spoke. It was the hat's only it sounded as if it was coming from inside Harry's head. This is indeed curious...

What is? Harry thought knowing the hat would be able to hear him.

Why this mind of yours, of course. So much here... The hat trailed off, and Harry was left waiting in the pause. He fidgeted restlessly

under the hat as the brim wriggled around his ears. Suddenly, the hat laughed out loud, and it echoed around the hall.

Uh... hat, sir? Harry said.

You have the most curious thoughts! The hat stated in Harry's mind, completely ignoring Harry. So very interesting... But, there's something deeper here. Ah yes, a thirst to prove yourself. And still, things deeper yet... Again the hat trailed off, and Harry wondered if it was supposed to take this long. Muffled voices behind him began to stir, and Harry knew the teachers were asking the same thing.

Is Gryffindor your house of choice? the hat asked him. Harry stumbled around for an answer.

Well, I don't really know... Just that Edward and Alex were- And Mister Lu- I just thought that I'd... like to... Harry faltered, and the hat spoke up.

Gryffindor would be a good choice for you; you'd do well, but still there's one house you might be better suited for... It's all here in your mind... Harry waited, but something in him seemed to know before the hat even lifted its voice...

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the hat. Harry remained seated as one stifled round of clapping was sounded. Harry pulled the hat slightly up over his eyes to see the hall quiet save for Edward who was cheering like a madman, the Gryffindors looking at him as if he certainly was. The House of Slytherin remained unmoved.

Harry tried to take the hat off fully, his mind an odd blank, but the brim of it clenched around his head.

"What-" Harry voiced, tugging harder as McGonagall came into view with her hand out. He pulled again, and it felt like he was trying to pull out his hair. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I just can't seem to get it off..."

I was wondering if I could stay atop your head a little longer? the hat asked.

"Potter?" That was McGonagall stepping in front of him.

"I think he wants... to stay on my head..." Harry stated confusedly.

A little while longer. Too many thoughts to dissect... The hat chimed already sounding distracted.

What makes you think I want you to dissect my thoughts? Harry asked.

"The hat requested to stay on your head?" From the way his professor asked, Harry knew that it was an unusual thing. The more he pulled the tighter the hat seemed to clasp around his head, so Harry gave up on that and gave McGonagall a defeated look. Whispers began to pick up volume in the Great Hall, and Harry just stood there, not knowing what to do.

He looked over at the Slytherin table, and again the faces turned to him were guarded, say for one boy with the palest face and hair Harry had ever seen- that boy was blank, unreadable. Harry didn't want to acknowledge the Gryffindor table, yet...

"I have to say, my boy, that this is indeed unusual!" Harry looked up to find bright blue eyes focused on him. For a moment, Harry just stared back, while something seemed to writhe uneasily in his belly. Maybe it was because the blue eyes were too... intense...

"I'm- I'm sorry Head Master," Harry stumbled when he remembered himself, at once trying to tug the hat off again, "but... I just can't... get him... off my head." Dumbledore laughed then, a warm chuckle.

"It's a peculiar thing, the requests of an old leather hat," Dumbledore said in his aged intonation. "Perhaps, you should humor his?" Again, the blue eyes seemed to look too deep, and Harry found he couldn't protest.

"Uh... I guess- I mean, I suppose it's alright," he agreed hesitantly. Dumbledore beamed down at him. He stooped down a little and placed a wrinkled hand upon Harry's shoulder.

"Welcome to Hogwarts, my dear boy." Harry nodded his head, his stomach squirming under the stare, the familiarity... Dumbledore removed his hand, and Harry staggered over to his table- his House: Slytherin.

Shaking slightly, he sat down at the end of the table where space had been since the beginning of the feast. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the guarded faces swivel into distrusts. Even the first years seemed to pick up on the vibes of the older students and quickly adjusted to match them. They didn't seem fazed at all about Harry adorning the Sorting hat like it was his everyday apparel. Or maybe that was why they were looking at him like that.

Harry stared down at the wooden table, the table that he would sit at every morning and at every evening...

He was in Slytherin.

How would they-?

Harry looked quickly to the Gryffindor table. Alex was staring at him like he didn't understand what had just happened. Edward appeared baffled as well, only his confusion was more subtle than Alex's blatant expression.

Harry was in Slytherin.

Not knowing why, Harry suddenly felt guilty, like he had done something wrong.

No, this doesn't mean anything, Harry told himself, flexing his fingers because the tendons felt too stiff. So I'm in Slytherin... It doesn't mean anything! Besides, that makes it all the less suspicious for me to carry out my duties...

Harry clenched his fists, willing himself to feel as assured as he sounded. In truth, the thought of being in the same house filled with... the children of Death Eaters unnerved him to his very core. Not to mention Severus Snape was the Head of House.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this. I can-

"Do you mind if I sit here?" a drawling voice spoke. Harry looked up, breaking his thoughts from his mantra, and found the boy with pale blond hair staring down at him expectantly with cold, indifferent blue eyes. The boy's voice- It sounded familiar to Harry...

"Uh- No, not at all," Harry managed to say, remembering to be polite. Harry watched as the blond smirked and sat across from him. I'm in over my head... Harry thought wearily.

No, I believe I am! The hat laughed.

"That isn't funny at all, you know," Harry muttered out loud, feeling he really didn't need a batty hat laughing at his worries.

"What isn't? My company? I should hope it isn't," the blond answered, adjusting his robes like they were ill suited.

"No, I'm sorry. I meant the hat," Harry said hastily, pointing to the hat. The boy quirked an eyebrow, and Harry felt it was because he wasn't as composed as he should be.

"How strange for you to wear the hat," the boy drawled on, and Harry recognized him as the boy who had been in Madam Malkin's shop. He narrowed his eyes. "Did he ask you to stay?" If Harry didn't think that it would be completely against the nature of a Slytherin, or against the nature of this boy Harry pegged for snobbish, he would have thought that the boy was smiling.

"Yes," Harry said simply, wanting the feast to begin so he could get the night over with.

"Does he find you interesting?" Something in the way the boy asked made Harry cautious. Harry laughed then, just as how he had seen Mr. and Mrs. Cole do when they found a question to be too pressing.

"No, he said he just wasn't ready to go back yet," Harry lied... easily.

I really don't want to return to the headmaster's office yet, the hat reiterated distantly.

The boy nodded his head, and if he wasn't convinced, he didn't show it.

"I haven't introduced myself yet," the boy droned. He held out a hand from across the table. "My name is Malfoy, Draco." Harry looked at the hand, feeling certain that the boy was testing him. Harry dipped his head slightly in acknowledgment and extended his own hand, meeting Malfoy's.

"And mine is Potter, Harry," he said. Giving the last name first was to honor the family name and to give importance to ancestry before one's self. For Harry, however, the formality was hollow, for what ancestry did he have when it was his own parents he knew next to nothing about?

"Potter, is it?" Malfoy asked, his voice monotone.

"Yes," Harry answered, feeling himself grow nervous. Did Malfoy know something about his parents? Harry waited. For what, he didn't know, but Malfoy didn't say anymore. He just smirked.

"I think I like Harry better," he said indifferently, looking at Harry with pale, blue eyes. Then Malfoy looked past Harry shoulder. "Your friends keep watching you," he said blandly. Harry turned his head slightly, and from the corner of his eye, he saw that Alex and Edward were, indeed, still staring at him. A lump gathered in his throat. He turned back to Malfoy.

"Yes," Harry said.

"They seem disappointed," Malfoy added, flicking some imaginary dirt from his finger.

"I'm not in the same house as them," Harry answered calmly. "That's all." Malfoy looked up casually towards Harry.

"You seem disappointed." Harry narrowed his eyes, not understanding Malfoy's intentions.

"Just surprised." Harry wasn't liking where this was going. He expected more observations out of Malfoy, but Malfoy just nodded his head as if he understood.

Harry took the opportunity of silence to rethink what he was told about the boy sitting before him. Malfoy was the very epitome of pureblood raising, that much was certain, for even the way he held himself seemed to relay his status. However, from what Harry was told, the Malfoy heir was nothing but a small, shadowy imitation of his more notorious father...

But Harry was beginning to think differently.

Maybe this Malfoy wasn't as fearsome as his father... yet, but Harry could distinguish the craftiness from the boy's seemingly banal mannerisms. That just meant that Harry would have to be even more careful in carrying out his duties. Harry could almost feel a cold sweat trickle down the back of his neck. Who knew what this Malfoy was capable of?

That's for Alex to find out, the hat whispered in his mind. Harry jolted causing Malfoy to look over at him with only a small glint of curiosity. Harry shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the hat, miming to Malfoy that it was the hat's doing, and then looked away, heart hammering in his chest.

Stop it! Harry seethed, trying to appear composed.

Stop what, Harry? the hat asked innocently.

Stop reading all my thoughts! he replied a bit worriedly, as if other people might over hear him and the hat. No one is to know.

Harry, I knew that much already from being on Alex's head! I know Edward's, too, the hat chimed as if it wasn't doing anything wrong. Harry tried to reel in his panic.

Just... stop it, he begged heatedly. Please! This evening was beginning to be too much.

"You really shouldn't space out," came Malfoy's quipping voice. Harry blinked up.

"Pardon?" Malfoy looked peeved for a moment, almost as if the boy wasn't accustomed to repeating himself, but the features smoothed over quickly enough.

"I said, you really shouldn't space out. Is that a habit of yours?" Draco asked cutting into a small portion of roast chicken.

"I wasn't spacing out," Harry said, "I was just listening to the-" but he stopped.

Roast chicken?

He looked down. The gold, sparkling plates that were empty just before were now piled with food. Harry had read about this and had listened to stories about it from Mr. Cole and Mrs. Cole. The food, cooked by the house elves kept by the school, always arrived magically after the head master's speech- Harry guessed he had missed it- and signified the end of the sorting ceremony.

Mouth-watering turkey sat right in front of Harry surrounded by dishes of sausages, potatoes, yams, all kinds of vegetables, sauces, foods he knew and loved, and some he couldn't recognize. Everyone was tearing into their food, except the Slytherins who cut delicately into their portioned rations upon their plates. Well, there were two Slytherins boys who weren't so delicate. They were gnawing into their cuts of foul, heedless of the blatant disapproval stemming from a girl with short, dark hair in front of them.

Harry then found Malfoy was watching him curiously.

"What?" Harry asked, meaning to sound casual instead of terse like he suspected he did.

"Just wondering if you were going to eat," he replied. That was all he said before returning to his meal.

Again, Harry looked around the hall. Everyone was enjoying supper, it seemed; Alex and Edward were even eating, though they didn't appear as jovial as their fellow Gryffindors.

Harry brought the food to his mouth, then on his tongue, chewed it slowly, and swallowed it all just as slowly. He tasted nothing. His mouth was too dry. He swallowed some of the liquid in his goblet, knowing it was pumpkin juice from the smell, but even that seemed to evaporate on his tongue.

That man was watching him still. Harry knew he was- and not just the man with black eyes; Dumbledore was, too. Harry was feeling a strange suppression beneath the two unrelenting gazes. A suppression that both unnerved him... and angered him?

Curious thoughts... the hat stated.

I'm sorry, but I don't understand you, Harry replied tersely, biting into a thing of boiled potatoes, not in the mood for any of this. He didn't

taste any of it. It was like eating a wad of paper, but it was something to focus on.

Your thoughts are always racing, did you know? Your mind is teeming with them. But there's something else here I just can't seem to wrap my brim around... The hat had said something like that earlier.

What do you mean? Harry asked. Then something occurred to him. Is that why you wanted to stay on my head? So you could figure it out? Whatever that is? For some reason, that thought incensed Harry.

Calm down, Harry, the hat said with a ease that made Harry even more irritated, Your magic riles when you are, you know. Harry gulped. He didn't like to be reminded of that, and the memory of the train incident brought itself to the forefront in Harry's mind. Ah yes, like that, that hat stated. Harry tensed.

As much as he wanted to throw the hat off of him right then and there, he didn't. He shoved more potatoes into his mouth, ignoring the offended glance from Malfoy.

So what if he lashed out magically earlier? So what if had done it when he was younger? Mrs. Cole had told him it was common for children to have magical outburst!

Yeah, children! Before they learn to guide their magic, a dark voice whispered. Harry knew it was his own and not the hat's, and that made it all the harder for him to use the excuse... because he knew better.

These particular tangents of thoughts made Harry squirm, and he needed to be collected.

Will you just tell me what you meant by what you said earlier? Harry asked, hoping this would serve as a divergent.

A good riddle only comes along once in awhile for this old hat, Harry! The hat sang. This was getting ridiculous, and Harry was sorely regretting agreeing to the hat's whim. So he was a puzzle?

Forget it, Harry snapped.

"Not very hungry, are you?" Harry looked up to find Malfoy staring at him- No, not staring... observing.

"Guess not," he said placing down his fork, its impression in his hand. Malfoy really was someone to watch out for.

"That just means you'll have to eat a bigger breakfast tomorrow," Malfoy replied, crossing his fork and knife over his plate.

Tomorrow.

Harry began running his hand through his hair before his fingers grazed the brim of the hat, so he sighed instead. It was nothing but a sigh of realization, a grim one at that.

Of course there'll be a tomorrow at this school, he told himself, and more after that. To tell himself that this night was just the first-day jitters made the whole situation seem more laughable than it was and ever will be.

This was the long hall.

"Are the breakfasts as good as the suppers?" Harry asked, trying to fortify himself- at last. Nothing must get to him. That dark, unwavering stare must not get to him.

I did do well... the hat said, its tone a low murmur, but Harry ignored it.

"How would you know? You barely ate this meal," Malfoy asked nodding to Harry's plate. Harry shrugged.

"I had a bigger breakfast than usual today," Harry lied.

"Well, I doubt Hogwarts' will be as filling then, but yes, they're good enough," Malfoy answered uninterestedly turning to look down his table of fellow Slytherins, all who had finished eating and who had similar crossed utensils upon their plates, except for the two burly boys of earlier. They were still eating.

Harry cautioned another glimpse of the Gryffindor table. Alex was completely done eating, his plate looking just as filled as Harry's,

while Edward was cutting into his meat, talking adamantly with one of the twins. Harry felt a distance stretching between him and his two friends that had nothing to do with the two other house tables between theirs.

Harry shook his head.

Suddenly, the food from the plates vanished, and a second later, desserts appeared. Harry, ordinarily, would have stuffed his plates full of the sweets, but tonight just the mere sight of the desserts made him feel nauseous. Even the sudden appearance of ghosts whirling about the Hall interested Harry none. He just wanted the night to be over with.

Harry watched vaguely as Malfoy debated between a treacle tart and a bowl of ice cream. Finally, he went with the ice cream. Harry went to studying the grooves in the table, ignoring the hat as it commented on this and that. He counted the curving lines so that he could focus on something other than the Death Eater not but several feet across from him.

Just then Dumbledore arose from the head table.

"Students," he called quietly, pulling everyone's attention all the same, "time to nestle into our beds just as the food nestles into our stomachs. Goodnight!" He waved his arm and all the desserts, half-eaten and not, vanished, along with the dishes. As if on cue, or perhaps it was one, several older students- two from each table- stood, each wearing the silver, prefect's badge. A tall, dark girl with long dark hair and a boy, stout and brutish looking, rose from the Slytherin table.

"First years," the girl called, "you are to follow us to the common room." All the other Slytherin students made their way passed the two prefects, not needing a guide. Harry was just getting up and making his way to the two older students when a hand closed over his shoulder. He tensed and looked over. Blue eyes met his.

"Harry, my boy, mind parting with our school's beloved hat?" Dumbledore asked .

"Sorry sir," Harry relaxed, "I guess I just got used to it being there," he lied.

I'll be sad to go, the hat said, It was so interesting. Perhaps you can visit me sometime, and we can talk... Harry smiled tightly at that, not thinking it likely he'll ever take up on the invite, and went to pull the hat off his head, hoping the hat would be less stubborn this time, but he paused.

Um, sorting hat? This... all this... You won't- I mean, this whole thing...but Harry didn't know how to ask. Dumbledore waited patiently.

Don't worry, Harry, the hat chuckled, This all stays here in your mind and in the tip of this old hat! Harry wanted to believe what the hat said, but something churned in his belly nonetheless. What if someone else decided to wear the hat one day and he just started blabbing away. His fingers curled tightly over the hat's rim. I like you, Harry, the hat said calmly.

Alright... Harry didn't know what that meant.

The four founders made me, each weaving a bit of their own secrets into me when they did so, and I've kept those all these long years, the hat said a bit wistfully, So don't fret! and Harry hoped that meant he was safe as he removed the hat and handed it to Dumbledore. Surely Harry and Edward and Alex weren't the only ones who had things that needed to be kept quiet and maybe the hat was duty bound to keep it just that- quiet.

"Thank you, Harry, and now off with you. It looks like Mr. Malfoy stayed behind," and Harry turned around to see the blond waiting by the Great Hall's entrance. "Wouldn't want you to get lost the first night," he said winking one blue eye at him. Then he left through a door behind the head table, hat in hand, and Harry felt a pang of unease.

Walking towards Malfoy- the hall was already empty of students and teachers; he had seen Snape disappear from a door behind the table in a whirl of black robes- he told himself that he hadn't failed before he even began. The hat wouldn't betray him, nor would it Edward or Alex.

"The brothers were waiting for you, too," Malfoy offered as Harry reached him, "but the Weasel Prefect ushered them off." Harry

furrowed his brows at Malfoy's statement. He hadn't just said Weasel, had he? He shook his head, and followed Malfoy down the many corridors and staircases- Harry remembered that some even shifted mischievously, causing students to take wrong turns or lead them to the wrong floors. He kept an eye out.

"Why'd you stay?" Harry voiced as he was led down a winding staircase where hundreds of moving portraits watched them from above.

"The others had already left," Draco answered simply, and Harry decided that Malfoy wasn't going to say any more, so he didn't ask further.

"Well, I'm grateful to you," Harry said, looking at the walls.

The corridor they were in now seemed to glow with an eerie green light, and it smelled of dank coolness, like air from caves. Harry had already known that the Slytherin house was in the dungeons, but he was a tiny bit grateful towards Malfoy for staying behind to show him exactly where the dungeons were. He was certain he would have gotten lost if left on his own.

There was, however, this odd sense of... something- Harry wasn't sure what- as he walked behind Malfoy, their footsteps bouncing off the clammy, stone walls around them, and it was oddly... calming. Or maybe that was just the tiredness in him speaking. Yes, he supposed, trudging behind Malfoy, it was just because he was tired that some of the anxiety seemed to lift.

Draco smiled, immensely pleased with himself.

He heard Harry stomping behind him like some forest troll, and Draco inwardly sighed in disapproval. The boy was a Slytherin, after all, and he should behave like one, no matter no one else was around.

Of course Harry had shown some of his Slytherin potential at dinner, the evasiveness and formality- Draco's smile slid into a smirk then. As composed as Harry had thought he'd been at the feast- or had tried to be, Draco had noticed a few certain peculiarities. There were questions, so many, of course, but Draco knew better than to spoil the fun.

He stopped before an expanse of stone wall, and felt Harry stop behind him.

"I'm sure you know that Professor Snape is the Slytherin head of house," Draco said in his usual tone. His statement seemed to rattle Harry a bit, Draco saw from the corner of his eye. That was to be expected, though. Professor Snape wasn't someone people mistook for... friendly. Quite the opposite, in fact.

And his Head of House had certainly looked the embodiment of severity this evening...

"Yes, I knew," Harry replied, letting a bit of a yawn escape. Draco's smirk widened just a hair.

"Just because you're Slytherin doesn't mean he'll go lightly on you if you don't know his subject," Draco cautioned. He really didn't want house points deducted all because someone forgot to read over their summer assignments, so he felt it necessary to warn Harry.

"Isn't that his job as a teacher?" Harry asked. Draco turned his head to look at Harry. Harry sighed. "I read the books," he said a moment later. Draco inclined his head in approval, intoned the password that would let them enter the Slytherin common room- a hidden door within the stone opened, a noise like grating rocks echoing in the corridor- and led Harry inside the House of Slytherin.

Something told him then, as he walked through the deserted common room- Of course his peers would know it was best to go to bed early; the teachers weren't going to be easy just because tomorrow was the first day of school- that he wouldn't be able to sleep too well. One glance to a staggering, tired Harry told him as much.

He wondered vaguely what his father would think, but dismissed it a second later as he walked down a couple of stone steps to the boys' dormitories.

This was his riddle to solve, and it made him smile all the more. It had been so boring last year.

Dumbledore sighed wearily to himself as he sat the beloved sorting hat on its shelf.

It had been an interesting evening.

He walked to his desk, pulled the chair out, and sat tiredly down. On his desk was the letter Connell Cole had sent him weeks ago explaining the entire situation. Well, not the entire situation, Dumbledore knew all too well, but most of it.

Dumbledore had replied, saying that he understood Connell entirely but would wish to speak with him further and more intimately. So Connell had come to him a week later after Dumbledore had owed his response, striding with as much confidence as he had when he was just a lad.

Dumbledore remembered when Connell had been a student at Hogwarts years ago, just before he was headmaster even. The boy had been dedicated and studious, the pinnacle of Ravenclaw attributes. It was to be expected that he would lead a life just so- Dumbledore glanced down at the signet at the head of the letter: two Rowan branches circling a red orb.

But to think that he would ask his sons- and Harry- to follow so closely in his footsteps at such young ages!

To think that they'd be here...

Dumbledore sighed again at which a faint warble was sounded. Dumbledore looked up and smiled fondly. Before his desk, on a golden perch, was a glorious bird whose red plumage rivaled the brightness of flames.

"Dear Fawkes," Dumbledore said. "What's an old wizard to do?" he asked. The bird just chirped a small note as its transparent lids glided across its bright, gold eyes. Dumbledore inclined his head thoughtfully. "I suspect that all I can do is wait and watch."

He looked over at the sorting hat sitting idly on the shelf surrounded by his other instruments and objects. The hat, of course, was sworn to secrecy- a trait the founding fathers had seen to fit to lace into it. Dumbledore had still hoped to gain some kind of insight, though, but the hat, of course, had had nothing to say besides, "I stand by all my

decisions." When Dumbledore had tried to, at least, ask why the hat had wanted to stay with Harry, the hat had only replied with, "A change of scenery!"

Dumbledore stood up and walked about his office. Portraits of the preceding headmasters and headmistresses watched him lazily from their framed vantage points- some were sleeping, though, and snoring lightly- as Dumbledore paced.

Arrangements had been made, of course, for the boys once Dumbledore had conceded to let them attend Hogwarts. There had been conditions, however, that Dumbledore had needed Connell to agree to before he could fully allow the boys to enter- one being that the boys had to stay on top of their studies. No exceptions were given, no matter the circumstances.

Connell had all but complied, assuring Dumbledore that he wouldn't have had it any other way either. Dumbledore walked over to a cabinet where an eerie, silver light was streaming through the crack of the doors and looked at it briefly before continuing his pacing.

So that matter was settled, along with others, but there were still many questions that Dumbledore had and, possibly against his better judgment, had kept just behind his lips. Years had taught Dumbledore a myriad of lessons, but there were still things beyond him... as there always would be. Dumbledore just wasn't sure what he was to do now.

He knew Connell was leaving something unsaid, and it worried Dumbledore that the man may not be as fully trusting of him as he once was. After all, it was Dumbledore to whom Connell had come to all those years ago when tragedy struck his family. Dumbledore had been all too willing to help then as he felt even now.

But this was his school. It's protection and the safety of all the students in it were entrusted to him, so Dumbledore wanted to understand completely why Connell and his league had felt this whole occurrence necessary. Hogwarts was warded against the things Connell had spoken of, and Dumbledore would defend its stony structure with all his strength and power if any harm did ever befall it.

Feeling that the pacing wasn't as therapeutic as it usually was, he settled for sitting at his desk chair once more. He reached for a favored treat he always kept in abundance upon his desk: a lemon drop. He put one into his mouth and delighted in the puckering effect it had on him.

Yes, Dumbledore thought, reaching for another lemon drop, the whole sorting feast had been interesting.

Why, even after the feast- and at this, Dumbledore let out a soft chuckle- he had been confronted by Filch saying that Neville had just arrived accompanied by his grandmother. That boy- Dumbledore let out another chortle at the remembrance of Neville's abashed face as he stuttered through an explanation of why he had missed the train. Madam Longbottom had stood sternly beside her frazzled grandson looking just as fierce as she always did.

Dumbledore still wasn't entirely sure exactly what had caused the boy to miss the Hogwarts Express. He thought it was something about an exploding dish set or was it that Neville's trunk had somehow disappeared suddenly only to be found later wedged into their chimney...? But the boy had made it safely to school and was, by now (and hopefully), sleeping soundly in the Gryffindor tower.

Perhaps he had met with Alex and Edward Cole- Dumbledore had been surprised when both were sorted into Gryffindor, thinking that they might follow their father into Ravenclaw- and Dumbledore wondered how that might have gone about. Dumbledore had known those two boys from when they were just infants, and seeing them this evening brought back a lot of memories.

And seeing Harry tonight...

Dumbledore closed his eyes and those questions he had been asking himself for so long now were clearer, just as prominent and burning as they had been that night.

He would have to watch Neville more closely now, too. What if all his suspicions came true? What if the theories and conclusions he had come to proved to be just as veritable? And what if all that he suspected would happen would actually come to pass?

Did he do right? Did he do right to let Harry into this school?

A long time ago, he had asked the very same question about another boy, and he had utterly failed him. Dumbledore wanted to believe he had learned from that failure, had become a wizard that would never repeat such undoing twice.

Yes, he needed to keep a close watch now... and wait.

Dumbledore lifted his head and turned to his door, Fawkes twisting its swan-like neck and head to look, too.

And now Dumbledore needed to explain certain things to- and try and pacify- one very incensed Potions teacher.

Chapter 5: A Tumultuous Start

Edward was still rather groggy as he stumbled behind his brother. It had been so warm under his blankets this morning that he had wanted to just curl up further and sleep, but, of course, he couldn't. Alex couldn't help but rip the covers back, yell at him a few times- something about breakfast or class- and then physically push him out of bed. To deter any more attacks by Alex, Edward had resentfully gotten dressed and had followed his brother out of the tower.

He was somewhat glad that Alex seemed to know where he was going. If left up to Edward, he would surely have ended up lost, probably somewhere terrifying like the girls' loo.

He barely remembered falling asleep last night, let alone how he had gotten from the Great Hall to the Gryffindor house, which he thought might be up in a tower somewhere (a full stomach had always made him sleepy). All he could recall was meeting some of the other Gryffindors, being led up some stairs to a room, seeing six beds, falling onto one bed which had his stuff at the foot of it, burying into the blankets, and then he couldn't remember anything else. It had been surprisingly easy to doze off. Edward had thought he'd be too wound up to sleep, but that hadn't been the case.

He had even somehow managed to completely daze out when meeting with the Boy-Who-Lived! Edward thought he could remember a little. There was the usual 'hullo, I'm so and so,' then a hand shake, downcast eyes and stuttering sentences, and a pale mark...

But, Edward was fuzzy brained at the moment. Well, he knew he had at least gotten a refreshing shut-eye.

Alex still looked tired, though; Edward saw. His eyes were all puffy with dark circles underneath; but he seemed to know where he was going, so Edward followed him. Alex led him down some stairs and down some corridors, down some more stairs, through the Entrance Hall, and then they were finally in the Great Hall.

Instantly, Edward's nose was bombarded with all kinds of scents, all delicious and warm. It made his stomach growl, and he was

suddenly very awake. Then again, food always had been a better wake up call than Alex's shrieking.

"Yeah, now your up," Alex mumbled as he sat down at the Gryffindor table. It took Edward a moment to realize why Alex had sat there and not with Harry who was sitting just across the room. Then he did, and he sat down, too.

Harry wasn't in their house.

He was with the Slytherins.

Alex was staring at a platter of biscuits as if he was discerning which of the buttered pastries was best for consumption, but Edward wouldn't buy it. Such an obvious tactic... Well, Edward wouldn't ignore Harry, so he stood.

"Where are you-?" his brother began to ask as Edward made to leave, but just then McGonagall stepped in front of the twins.

"A late start there, Mr. Cole?" she said as she handed him a piece of paper. Edward blinked a couple of times at the sudden appearance of his professor, subconsciously grabbing for the paper. McGonagall handed one over to Alex as well. Edward just held the paper, staring over McGonagall's shoulder over at Harry who had his back to him. The Malfoy heir was sitting next to him, but it didn't look as if either one was talking.

"Mr. Cole?" punctuated McGonagall's voice.

"Ah, yes ma'am," Edward replied, finding himself.

"Surely you aren't still tired? Waking up so late..." McGonagall did look the type to lecture.

"I always have a bit of trouble waking up," he laughed, glancing over the paper he'd recieved. It was his schedule, and he didn't know if he was happy or not about having Herbology as his first class.

"Well, just so long as you're never late to class," she said, peering sharply at Edward through her glasses. "I expect to win the House cup this year," she added with a glance out into the Entrance Hall,

and Edward knew she was thinking about four hourglasses filled with gemstones.

"Of course, ma'am," Edward said, smiling. "I'm a bit competitive myself." Edward couldn't be sure if his teacher smiled or not, but he was certain that she looked very approving. She inclined her head and strolled off to the staff table. Edward looked again over at the Slytherin table and then sat next to his brother.

Edward sighed, grabbed a muffin, buttered it a little, and began munching on it. He looked out of the corner of his eye to find Alex was now watching Harry sadly. Harry was just sitting there, not eating, not talking, though it looked like Malfoy now was, and he looked just as tense now as he had yesterday. Edward placed a couple of pancakes on a plate, put a dribble of syrup on it, and pushed it sideways towards Alex.

"Eat up," Edward said, biting into another muffin.

"I'm not hungry," Alex said softly. Edward frowned.

"You're the one who woke me up so we could eat breakfast, so now you're going to eat breakfast," Edward ordered, stabbing the pancakes with a fork. "I could have slept a few extra minutes," Edward grumbled.

"What? And risked having your temper flare all day?" Alex asked bitterly. "I don't think so. You're an absolute wretch if you haven't eaten anything all day," Alex huffed indignantly. Edward blinked but couldn't argue such a valid point, so he placed his muffin down.

"Quit sulking then," Edward said flatly. Alex tore his eyes away from the Slytherin table to glare at Edward.

"I'm not sulking!" Alex countered heatedly. Edward raised an eyebrow at that.

"He's not any different," Edward said calmly. Alex opened his mouth to yell something, Edward was sure, but no words came out. He just kind of blanked there, mouth agape- Edward fought hard not to cram a thing of eggs into his brother's mouth, knowing he hated eggs. Finally, his brother closed his mouth and turned away.

"I know that. I never thought that," Alex said.

"Then why do you keep looking at him like that?"

"It's not because he's in Slytherin!" Edward rose an eyebrow. "Well, maybe it is just a little, but it isn't really- I," and he huffed out exasperatedly. "I just wonder how he's going to manage," Alex ended faintly. Edward placed a few pieces of bacon on his plate.

"He's Harry. He'll manage," Edward assured. He was grateful that their table was practically empty. All the other Gryffindors were early birds, it seemed. If it weren't, Edward didn't think he could say what he was about to without severe repercussions. "Maybe it's because Malfoy's with him now," Edward stated quietly.

Again, Alex whirled on him.

"What?" Alex shouted a bit loudly.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Alex," Edward said, tone low, as a couple of Ravenclaws passed them. Alex faltered a moment.

"It's just... It's Malfoy!" Alex said. Edward sighed. He knew his brother too well sometimes.

"And what would you have him do? Would you want Harry to spurn the Malfoy heir? Would you want him to outwardly say he doesn't trust the boy?" Edward demanded quietly.

"No. I know he can't, but- Dammit Edward! What am I supposed to tell Father?" Alex looked completely upset. It was good he had Edward there to knock some sense into him.

"The truth," Edward said simply. "Harry's in Slytherin- There's no getting around that- and he's talking to the Malfoy heir. Father will know. I know; you know- or I hope you know- that Harry can only act now. Stop fretting about... that."

Edward went to pile some eggs on his plate, fried and golden and steaming, and was starting to think the whole bit about four separate houses was a load of bollocks. Edward really wanted to go over and sit with Harry, Harry who looked so tired and worried, but he knew

he couldn't. No, he had to stay where he was and wait for Alex's bout of worrying to pass.

Of course, he knew that his brother wouldn't want to go over to the Slytherin table ever anyway. Alex was always too preoccupied with tradition. He knew Alex would never want to cause Harry any trouble, and a Gryffindor marching over to pal around with Slytherins was a taboo even Edward had picked up on in the few hours he'd spent at Hogwarts, fuzzy-brained and all.

"It'll be strained now," Alex mumbled after a moment, head bowed tiredly. Edward looked up at the enchanted ceiling that swam with inky splotches of blue and grey. It was going to be a stormy day, was what he thought.

"Yeah, well, we won't fall victim to such old rivalries," Edward said. He turned to his brother and grinned mischievously. He needed Alex to know that some ancient feud between two houses wasn't going to stop them from being Harry's friends. Alex smiled, too, after a second, and then laughed softly.

"Guess you're right... You're always right," Alex chuckled, shaking his head. Edward, in any normal circumstance, would have commented wittingly at how his infallibility should be obvious, but he just nodded his head instead. Alex needed to have a little more trust.

"Hurry up," Alex said suddenly, standing up, "Let's go to class before we're late." Edward crammed a few more things of bacon into his mouth and then followed his brother, but not before Edward gave a last look to the Slytherin table. Harry had turned then, too, and caught his eye. Edward smiled; he wanted to go talk to him, but he really did think he was going to be late- Herbology was a ways away apparently. Harry smiled, too, but it was a tentative one.

Edward didn't like that.

"Oy, Harry!" he shouted, cupping a hand around his mouth, making Harry jump a bit. "Make sure to eat all your breakfast. A growing boy needs his nourishment!"

"For Merlin's sake, Edward!" Alex clucked like an angry mother hen. "Don't embarrass him!" He waved at Harry apologetically while jostling Edward out the door. Edward was okay with that, though,

because before he was shoved out of the dining hall, he heard Harry laugh.

"Honestly, Edward," Alex sighed, as they walked out under the cloudy skies. They were walking down a hill which was slippery with dew, like a precursor to how wet it was going to get later. The clouds were awfully dark, and Edward thought he could even feel the moisture in the air. He never really liked rain.

"Cheer up!" Edward exclaimed, smacking his brother across the back. "Just think, after Herbology, we'll have class with the Slytherins!" "Yeah," Alex said slowly, "in Potions." Edward waved dismissively which made Alex roll his eyes.

The clouds were dark above; Edward had Herbology now; he'd have Potions with Harry and Professor Snape next; and all he could think about as he stepped into the green house where the rest of his Gryffindor peers sat was how he really would like nothing more than to take a nap.

Rainy days had always made him sleepy, and Edward never thought well when he was sleepy.

Charms had been utterly boring, but that wasn't Professor Flitwick's fault, necessarily. Charms had always been a rather easy subject for Draco, and it didn't help much that all Flitwick had wanted to do during class was review some of the simpler spells they'd learned last year- all of which Draco could perform in his sleep... if he wanted to.

Thank Merlin for Potions, was what Draco kept telling himself as he walked down the stairs that led to the dungeons.

Unintelligible chatter hummed and rasped around the second year Slytherins while the thudding of many footsteps echoed within the halls. Turning his head to the side and from his periphery, Draco watched Harry bounding along sluggishly, if not hesitantly, behind the rest of the Slytherins. There was just something to Harry's taciturnity and detachment that made Draco suspicious.

This wasn't some ordinary new-student syndrome, Draco was certain. No. This was something different. Draco just didn't know what exactly at the moment.

After the Sorting feast, and after Draco had shown Harry to the Slytherin commons, Harry had found his bed, crawled in, shut the curtains, and that had been that. Draco had been a little disappointed, for he had wanted to ask Harry a couple of questions. However, he had decided he could wait. Draco's father had always stated that first impressions were important, and Harry had certainly made an impression. Being an adoptive child of a Pureblood family wasn't very common. It was a rarity. And the fact that Harry was purposefully trying to avoid people- He had been trying all during breakfast and first class to ignore Draco- was all the more alerting.

It was for those few reasons alone that Draco was willing to drag out the curiosity.

After all, it had been a very boring year last term.

And besides, whatever Harry's reasons were, Draco knew that he would at least cheer up for next class. It was Potions, and only Gryffindors hated that class... Well, maybe Hufflepuffs bemoaned potions, too; Draco wasn't too sure. But what he was certain about was that Potions class should be very... informing. Surely one or more of Draco's theories on Harry would be put to the test. Draco almost felt himself smiling in public, but only almost.

Returning his attention back to Pansy- at least part of his attention anyway- he was nonplussed to find her still talking about the new DADA professor. Even Millicent on Pansy's other side was aiding in the revolting conversation. They were now commenting upon the man's elegant charm, something that the boys of Hogwarts were sorely lacking. He dropped back from the two girls and fell into step with Blaise and Theodore.

"Sickening, isn't it?" Theodore asked him. "The way they all gossip about him, you'd think he'd be some kind of legend," the boy spat contemptuously, his dark brown eyes narrowing. Blaise smiled wryly.

"Haven't you read his books, Theo? They're his autobiographies," Blaise commented.

"Have I read his books? What? All eight of them?" he asked incredulously. "I think I had more important things to do over the summer than read some man's sopping memoirs," he snarled.

Draco said nothing but agreed completely with his peer. All summer long, the DADA required reading had sat forgotten- purposely- in a corner of Draco's room, and had only been packed for school because the house elves had found them and had stowed them. Not that Draco had perused them once since arriving at school. He was confident that his schooling of the Dark Arts went far beyond what the new professor looked capable of teaching.

"Hey, what's with the Potter kid?" Theodore suddenly asked, gesturing quickly with his head. Draco looked back to see that Harry had fallen even further behind. His head was bowed and the knuckles that grasped around the band of his shoulder bag were turning white. Draco felt himself smiling.

"Don't tell me you weren't a little apprehensive of Professor Snape for your first class of Potions," Draco responded. Theodore didn't say anything, but the responding tch was answer enough. Countless students had reacted warily to the Potions teacher, Slytherin or not; Professor Snape just had that effect on everyone.

The group of students entered the classroom, and Draco felt a familiar ease come over him as he stepped into the darkened room. Small candelabras gave light from above while candles and sconces about the room emitted a slighter luminosity. Of course the light of wick was nothing compared to the windowed rooms of the other classrooms. Still, Draco revered this class and took his usual seat in the front row. He wouldn't hold it against his Professor for using darkness as an intimidator. After all, his Professor was a Slytherin.

He was just settling into his seat when Theodore tapped him on the shoulder. Theodore motioned to the back of the class, and Draco saw that he was gesturing towards Harry. Draco inwardly sighed and stood up wordlessly while Theodore, with his task completed, went to take a seat next to Pansy. Draco made his way to the back of the classroom.

"What are you doing?" Draco demanded, coming up next to Harry. Harry blinked at him a couple of times as if conveying that Draco shouldn't be asking such a rhetorical question.

"Taking a seat?" he answered quizzically.

"Yes, Harry, I can see that," Draco replied coolly, "but why in the back? You'll make us look bad." He gestured to his fellow Slytherins who were all occupying the seats closest to the front. Only Gryffindors willingly sat in the back.

"That's not my intention, Malfoy,"- Draco frowned at that- "I just prefer... the back." Draco wouldn't have believed him even if Harry had managed to sound convincing, and because Draco knew that Harry's response wasn't a sufficient answer, he also knew he was fully justified in taking Harry by the sleeve of his robes and dragging him to the front.

"Trust me, Harry, it'll be lot worse for you sitting in the back," Draco warned, Harry giving him an odd look in response. Draco shrugged. "Besides," he added casually, sitting down and pulling Harry down next to him making Harry flop clumsily into his seat, "Do you really want to be sitting with the Gryffindors?"

"What's wrong with that?" Harry asked defensively. Draco raised one brow, and ignored Harry for a moment as he shuffled through his bag to find parchment and a quill. He could feel Harry getting angrier with each second Draco dismissed him.

"Harry," Draco began sympathetically, "it's not just because the house is filled with the greatest idiots ever,"- Harry looked like he was going to say something to that; Draco didn't care that he had inadvertently insulted the Cole brothers as well- "You'll just come to find that in this class, with the Gryffindors is not exactly where you want to be." Draco couldn't make it any clearer than that.

Harry turned away and didn't say anything to Draco; he just began yanking out some bits of parchment instead. Draco watched, slightly amused, and when the pile of parchment was just tall enough to be ridiculous, Harry opted to pull out his quill and Potions book. Then he sat there, stiff, grim, and now completely irate.

Draco inwardly sighed, partly because of Harry but mostly because the Gryffindors had just swarmed in. Draco all but grimaced. Why must his favorite class be tainted by the Gryffindors? Harry stiffened drastically just then, and peeked warily over his shoulder at the students entering.

In came the Cole brothers, the taller one strutting in first as his more timid-looking brother followed. Draco watched as Edward- Draco knew both the brothers' names- came down the row and stopped right next to Harry. The whole room turned to watch the two brothers, but the Slytherins, Draco knew, watched for entirely different reasons. His fellow second years were all asking many of the same questions that Draco, himself, wondered at.

Glancing over some of his summer notes, Draco listened as Edward talked about the dinner last night, how even now he wasn't sure of the way to the Gryffindor tower- Draco wasn't surprised to hear of a Gryffindor losing his way- and how this morning he had almost slept through his first class. From the periphery of his vision, Draco observed Harry who was listening intently to Edward, even smiling and nodding his head and saying things like, 'you would do that, Edward,' and Draco noticed just how tense Harry was. Draco also saw how the other Cole twin, Alex, looked at Harry. The boy's expression was solemn and, to Draco, a tad patronizing, almost as if he pitied Harry for being in Slytherin.

Draco didn't like that.

"I'm sorry," Draco interrupted casually, sorting through the notes he took over summer- Where were the notes he had taken on the Confusing Concoction?-, "but class is starting soon," -he looked at the Cole brothers- "and I wouldn't want to be associated with the two who will get detention for not being in their seats when it does." Draco didn't miss that Alex's jaw had tightened, nor had he missed Harry's apologetic expression to his surrogate brothers. It was Edward, though, that took Draco by surprise.

Edward looked at Draco expressionlessly- Draco wondered if he had comprehended what he had said. Then the boy smiled, a toothy grin that made Draco narrow his eyes.

"Would he really give detention on the first day?" Edward laughed. He ran a hand through his hair. "I suppose there's no leniency for ignorance, then. Well, Alex, let's take our seats before we sully their reputations," Edward said lightly as he winked at Harry. He patted Harry on the shoulder and then walked off. Alex stopped beside Harry.

"During lunch- we have a break after next period- Do you wanna explore the grounds a bit?" The boy's voice was a petulant whine. Even the boy's expression was plea. It very much irritated Draco. Harry agreed softly, and Alex wordlessly went to take a seat in the back. Of course Harry had agreed to go, the two Gryffindors were his surrogate brothers after all.

In time, though, Harry would see just how deep Slytherin bonds went. It was only because Harry was new that the other Slytherins would allow such contact with the Gryffindors. It wouldn't last too long, though.

Once everyone had made it to the class, the room was filled with voluble conversations, absent of Harry's voice, of course. Draco was just leaning over to tell Harry about Quidditch tryouts and how he was a guarantee for seeker when the door of the classroom slammed shut, Professor Snape, in a whirl of black robes, striding in. Draco wondered if it had been the clamorous noise of the door or the appearance of Professor Snape that had made Harry jump.

"Quiet down," Professor Snape said, unnecessarily, his voice a mere even tone. Upon his appearance, the class quieted and settled immediately. That lesson had been learned on the first day of school when they were all just first years.

Professor Snape regarded them all coolly, his black eyes surveying the room, and Draco saw a hint of a sneer in his professor's expression. "To say that I expect all of you have read over the summer would only be ignorance on my part." Draco inwardly snickered as his professor pointedly looked over the Gryffindors. "It is well I know better. However, let us see how far some of you have let me down."

Draco leaned over to Harry and whispered, "You'll really like this class." Harry only nodded his head once, though, his eyes glued to the book before him.

"Last year you all learned the basics of a much more intricate art. Rest assured we will expand upon that immensely. Many of you will undoubtedly struggle." Snape, again, snidely regarded the Gryffindors. "However, the leniency I showed last year-" Draco heard someone snort far behind him and knew, without looking, that it had to have been Weasley, "-will not be repeated this term. I will

no longer tolerate such base blunderings of my subject." The entire class was silent, and Draco admired the grip his professor could have over such a crowd.

"Now," and Snape strode to his desk where he picked up a piece of parchment and began to call roll. It was nothing out of the usual. Names were read, and students replied. Snape read down the roster; read Draco's name, and Draco responded accordingly. Snape called out Pansy's name, and she, too, answered.

"Potter, Harry." Draco blinked. Not from confusion, really, but because he thought he heard something underline his professor's tone just then. It wasn't irritation as it normally was with the Gryffindors, and it wasn't even toned like it was with the Slytherins. Not even the esteemed Cole twins had received any sort of recognition when their names were read. Strange...

Draco didn't think that it was malice. No, it wasn't malice. He was just making assumptions, and Draco was taught better than that.

"Puh-present..." Harry whispered, not looking at Snape, and Draco elbowed him in the arm. "Sir!" Harry shouted. Some students began sniggering while Draco gazed at Harry curiously. Snape went down the list of names as if nothing peculiar had just occurred, but Draco knew. He knew that something had just happened, and just like that his curiosity piqued again.

When Snape had finished calling the names, he set everyone in pairs. He gave his wand a flick and instructions appeared on the board behind him. The Calming Draught. Draco was curious how he'd fair at such a complicated potion. Though no one made a sound, Draco was certain all the Gryffindors were groaning.

Excited as much as Draco could be, he pulled out his potions kit- Harry mirroring him lethargically- and then went to retrieve the few ingredients the simple potions kit lacked from Snape's cupboard. When he got back, Harry was already dicing the skullcap, and Draco wondered if Harry really knew what he was doing. He was cutting the herb very haphazardly.

As was customary, Snape began making his rounds. He hovered over the Gryffindors, scrutinizing their potions, lifting his nose in contempt at each of their soon-to-be failures. He nodded

approvingly at Pansy and Theo's, cautioned Crabbe and Goyle from adding the valerian too soon, and said nothing as he stared down into the cauldron of Mudblood Granger.

Draco had never flinched when Snape came by his desk because Draco had never botched a potion. In fact, he was even making up for the slack on Harry's part currently. Draco would talk to him later about that. Harry needed to be quicker in movements, for much of the steps had to be completed in a certain amount of just wasn't going to do so at the moment, not when Snape was about to pass by. He had to concentrate. He could get Slytherin ten points with this potion.

However, Snape didn't stop. He walked right past, but Draco couldn't ponder at it because Harry was about to add the bugleweed too soon and ruin everything.

"What are you doing?" Draco hissed, shoving Harry's hand out of the way of the cauldron.

"I'm adding the bugleweed!" Harry spat. Harry seemed very on edge, but that didn't give him the right to address Draco in such a tone, nor did it justify him in wrecking their potion.

"Read the instructions and tell me where does it say to add the bugleweed before the liquid's even ready," Draco said coldly. Harry looked at the board, his eyes darting back and forth quickly as they scanned each line of the directions.

"Nowhere," he replied, scowling. Draco smirked triumphantly as Harry dumped the minced plant back on the dicing board.

Draco was too absorbed in his task to notice his professor purposefully avoiding his table, nor did he catch the repeated trips Alex Cole made to and from Snape's pantry, each cycle passing by Harry. It wasn't till the bugleweed was finally- and properly added- and the liquid turned to a translucent and shimmering blue that Draco wiped his brow and appraised his brilliancy. Spooning the potion into a phial, he corked it, and then handed it to Harry.

"What?" Harry asked stupidly, staring at the outstretched phial.

"What do you mean by that? Here. Put this on Professor Snape's desk so he can give us our marks," Draco explained, irritated. He had basically just brewed the whole potion, the least Harry could do was carry it over to Snape.

"Um... shouldn't you take it- I mean, I should clean up this-"

"No, I don't think so. I'd rather do it, so here you go," and Draco shoved the phial into Harry's hand. Harry stood there dumbly for a minute as if he was going to protest, but Draco ignored him and began clearing away some of the potion ingredients. Harry turned at last, and Draco didn't think that he could possibly walk any slower.

Draco began sparing what ingredients he could, storing the remains back into his kit- Harry's, too, he sorted and returned- and then he disposed the ingredients that couldn't be salvaged. He didn't dare clean out the cauldron yet.

Harry, however, in the space of time it had taken Draco to clean their table, had not yet even reached Professor Snape's desk where the Professor was currently marking across what looked like notes. Instead, Harry wavered over to speak with Alex who was once again standing by Snape's pantry, returning a large abundance of unused potion ingredients. Draco narrowed his eyes as Edward came up to them.

The eldest Cole said something to Harry, at which Harry nodded solemnly. Edward smiled then and took from Harry's hand the phial of Draco's potion. Draco wasn't about to have some Gryffindor sabotage his hard work and was just about to confront the oldest Cole twin, when Edward took the phial, and along with his, placed it on Snape's desk. Snape didn't even glance at the boy; the professor just went on scrawling.

Edward returned to Harry, and Alex and made some joke. Harry smiled, and then politely dismissed himself, returning back to his table. Draco stared at him as he came nearer.

"What?" Harry asked, stepping in front of his seat.

"Feeling ill?" Draco asked innocently. Harry looked at him strangely before smiling.

"No. I feel just fine," he said evenly. Draco smiled, too. Harry's answer was said in enough conviction that anyone who wasn't as clever and observant as Draco would be fooled. Thank Merlin he was skilled in such things. It made everything more interesting.

"Maybe it's just the first day nerves?" Draco offered, finally clearing their cauldron with an *evanesco*. Harry didn't respond; he only watched as the liquid in the black cauldron was whisked away into nothingness, disappearing completely. Then class was dismissed, and the students noisily gathered their belongings and left. Harry was rather quick to get all his stuff and dash out. Draco had barely enough time to catch up with him.

"Where are you going, Harry? Transfiguration is this way?" Draco asked, snatching Harry's sleeve and trying to steer him to the staircase.

"I... I have to go to the loo," Harry said hurriedly as he yanked his arm free. Before Draco could say anything else, Harry was rushing down the corridor soon to disappear around the corner.

Strange... Draco thought as he hurried to catch up with Crabbe and Goyle.

"I don't think I did too well on that potion," Goyle said to Draco.

"Well that means I didn't do well either," Crabbe said, frowning. "How'd you think you did, Draco?"

"I had a little difficulty," Draco responded blankly. Crabbe and Goyle nodded in unison and began to talk about what they hoped the house elves were making for dinner. Draco couldn't help but roll his eyes at such an expected conversation of his two friends, and instead went to thinking about how very unusual Harry was.

But even Draco felt the corners of his mouth hook up into a small smirk, and this time, he did let himself smile.

Harry plowed down the hall, running into students and through a very indignant ghost. When he finally reached the loo he remembered seeing on his brief tour of Hogwarts that morning- courtesy of Malfoy- he threw open the door, shut it firmly behind him,

went over to the first sink, grabbed each end of the basin, and tried to regulate his breathing.

He thought he had survived the first of the test. The Sorting feast had been so excruciating that he didn't think it could have gotten any worse. Only it could, and it did. Really, though, Harry should have known better. Being under the relentless stare of Snape at the feast was nothing to being right in the man's class!

Harry sighed through a ragged breath and rubbed at his forehead. Harry supposed that all it meant for him now was that things could always get worse. At least the man hadn't spoken to him besides calling out his name, and a right job Harry had made of that... His nerves had really gotten the best of him. Harry bet even Malfoy had caught on- the boy's passive comments were anything but random remarks.

Harry turned the faucet and listened to the sound of the rushing water before pooling the cold liquid into his hands and splashing some on his face. Harry knew he was out of it then because he hadn't taken off his glasses and now had to wipe them dry.

How could he possibly get through all this? Edward and Alex had acted normally while Harry, on the other hand, had tensed and froze every time Snape had come too close. He wasn't even able to dropoff a phial of potion- Edward had to do that for him- the potion which Draco had basically brewed all by himself and all because Harry had been too paranoid to even remember what potion they were brewing, and then Harry had almost ruined it, and-

Merlin...

Turning off the faucet, Harry went over the plans in his head as if they were a mantra. Thinking about them distantly made it seem less real and frightening. Harry had always been good at detaching himself. With a new- and unsteady- sense of purpose, he left the bathroom and made his way to Transfiguration. He just hoped he wasn't yet late- he really didn't want to be on Professor McGonagall's bad side because Harry knew he would have enough problems with enough professors as it was- and he also couldn't wait for break so he could be with Edward and Alex again. Potions had been far too agonizing for Harry to have behaved normally with

his brothers. Besides, he was also really hungry now. Even as shaken as he was, he was looking forward to a good meal.

"Oy! There he is!" Edward shouted as Harry padded over to him and Alex. Edward patted the soft ground next to him, silently commanding Harry to sit there, and Harry, being the good boy that he was, obeyed. Edward had picked a perfect spot, a spot that sat right atop a small hill in which there was a clear view of the lake, Hogwarts, and the Forbidden Forest. Plus it was lovely weather, perfectly warm with just the right frequency of light breezes to cool them all off.

"Now, now! I have laid this sumptuous feast before you, you gallant warriors, and you shall eat to your heart's content!" Edward announced, already busying himself with a plate of roast ham.

"I didn't know we were allowed to eat out here," Harry said softly as he looked out towards the lake.

"Well, they didn't say anything," Edward replied with a mouth full. Alex looked disgusted.

"And that means it's alright," Alex added sarcastically.

"Hey, you followed. You must not have had a problem with it," Edward said.

"That's because I know there's nothing wrong with it," Alex quipped.

"Right... So then what are you getting your knickers in a twist for?" Edward asked confusedly.

"Merlin, Edward. I meant that you didn't know but still thought it was perfectly alright," Alex admonished.

"Yeah, well, it is, isn't it?" Edward said slowly. He wondered if his brother's not sleeping well was affecting his reasoning skills.

"That's not the point," Alex huffed.

"What is then?" Edward asked. His brother made a funny face, one of those mouth-agape-brows-furrowed-expressions, and Edward

thought he looked like a befuddled gorilla. Harry snickered beside him; the good lad would see the humor in Alex's face all too clearly.

"You know," Alex began, spooning some beans unto his plate.

"What, dear brother?" Edward smiled.

"Never mind," he grumbled. Edward shrugged his shoulders as Harry went to pick up a roll. Edward watched disapprovingly as Harry bit into the bread.

"You sadden me by only eating that moldy bread there when you have all this to feast upon," Edward said gravely.

"What are you doing? Playing king? Don't you think we're a bit too old now for that?" Alex said tiredly, brushing a bug off of his shoulder. Edward glared at his brother.

"Yes, how could I forget? We're big boys now- playing adult games," Edward mumbled. Harry smiled sadly and replaced his half eaten roll for the roast ham.

"Well you two at least play it better than me. I almost botched the potion today," Harry said, and Edward could hear the subtle anger in his voice. "A Calming Draught even! We've only made that how many times?" Harry asked, berating himself further. Edward frowned.

"It's understandable, Harry," Alex said softly.

"So it was that noticeable then?" Harry asked darkly.

"Only because we know you so well," Edward added quickly. Harry snorted.

"Malfoy noticed. He even asked me if I wasn't feeling well," Harry spat contemptuously. Edward didn't know what to say. The Malfoy heir was sharp, even Edward could tell that much.

It occurred to him then (and he wondered why such an apparent reality was just then dawning upon him) that Harry was in a very peculiar and dangerous spot. Being that he was in Slytherin, not only did he have Snape, the very man he was spying on, to contend with, but he also had Malfoy to worry about. It wasn't that Edward

didn't sympathize with his brother for having Malfoy to report on, but his brother could do so from a safer distance. Harry, though, had been thrown right into the snakes' pit.

However, all he could do was watch over Harry, guard him in secrecy, just as he had vowed to guard his brother, and just as he had been told to guard another.

The gravity of the conversation was lifted then when Harry's stomach gave an unbearably long gurgle to which the only proper reaction was to laugh hysterically.

"I second that, mate!" Edward laughed. Harry smiled sheepishly, his cheeks flushing slightly.

"I didn't really eat breakfast," Harry mumbled.

"Well don't talk now then!" Edward jokingly admonished. "This king demands merriment and gorging yourself until you burst!"

"That's no competition for you then, is it?" Alex laughed. Edward stole the meat from his brother's plate and placed it on his own. He gave them food, and he could take it away. Harry shook his head as he stuffed his own face with a proper meal.

It was good like this- being with the people Edward cared for most in the world. It was good to see Harry laugh because every time Harry didn't, and Edward caught sight of it, it felt wrong. But this was right. This was how it should be, how it should always be and will be, and Edward would believe it too if not for the pressing tightness in his chest. For now, though, he could be happy alongside Alex and Harry.

They talked about the sorting feast, Hogwarts, some of the people Edward and Alex had met- a know-it-all named Hermione granger; an enthusiastic shadow to the Boy-who-lived named Colin Creevey; their second year dorm mates Seamus, Dean, Ron Weasley, and of course Neville Longbottom.

"You wouldn't know he was the legendary Boy-who-lived by looking at him," Alex stated, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Nor from talking to him," Edward added at which Alex agreed.

"What's he like then?" Harry asked.

"He stammers a lot," Alex started.

"Because he gets nervous," Edward interjected.

"And he gets nervous a lot," Alex continued. "He really is quite average."

"Except for that scar," Edward said, picking through the remains of the ham. Edward had read all about Neville's conquering of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named through countless books and had been regaled with the story time and time again by his parents. The Wizards in America didn't really know too much about the darkness that had taken over wizarding Britain years ago, nor were few knowledgeable about Neville, but Edward had known because his parents had known.

And seeing the scar in person made everything seem all the more real.

"He likes Herbology a lot, though. In fact, when you can get him to really talk, it's usually always about plants," Alex was saying when Edward came out of his reverie. "You really do forget that he's a hero when you're around him."

"And from what I hear, you and him have something in common," said Edward. Harry looked to him confusedly. "Potions isn't one of his favorite classes either." Edward smiled. Harry smiled slightly in return, and that was okay with Edward. As long as he could get Harry to smile at such a statement, it was going to be alright.

They continued talking until lunch came to an end. They cleaned up their mess, walked into the Dining Hall, placed their dishes on a random house table where they'd soon be magicked away, and made their way to the halls. Edward was sad that their break was over and was reluctant to see Harry off. 'Course he really couldn't get a word in after Malfoy had shown up to retrieve Harry for their next class, but he did the best he could which entailed shouting across the hall to Harry that he'd see him later for supper. He will never understand why his brother always looks so aghast after he does such things. How else could he have told Harry?

"Really, Edward," Alex sighed as they rushed off to their next class-double History with a ghost named Binns. "Do you think you could spare Harry from you're crude mannerisms?"

"Crude mannerisms?" Edward repeated, appalled. "The King does as he pleases!"

"Oh Merlin..." his brother groaned, but Edward didn't pay too much attention because they were going to have History next. Edward like history- it was about the only thing he could ever manage to be attentive with during his father's schooling- and besides, this class was taught by a ghost! That made it all the more exciting, Edward thought as his brother droned on and on about Edward's immaturity.

A/N: Crumbs and carrots... Again, sorry it took so long to update. I hadn't forgotten it nor abandoned it... I just got caught up writing other stories. Whoops! ^_^ Still, hope you enjoyed anyhow and will continue to read!

Chapter 6: Meanderings

"So... what do we make of him?" Theo asked as he reclined in his chair.

"Not very talkative is he?" Blaise commented.

"Oh... I think he speaks volumes," Pansy giggled from the window sill she sat upon. "Don't you agree, Draco?" Draco flipped lazily through his book and asked himself why he had even considered picking up a book titled: Bogs: Potion Ingredients a' Bounty. "Draco?" He looked up to find Pansy hovering over him.

"What?" he asked returning back to his uninteresting book.

"What do you make of Potter?" she asked him in her girly air.

"He doesn't talk much," Draco said.

"So we agree?" said Blaise as he scrawled across his parchment. Draco nodded, thinking that he really should find another book to read to save his sanity. Draco and some of his fellow Slytherins had just finished classes for the day (Double Transfiguration, History of Magic, and Astronomy), and were occupying the library until supper.

"Theo, stop making that clunking noise." Blaise curtly demanded. Theo tilted forward in his chair and the two front legs came down with a loud, echoing thud. Draco eyed the librarian cautiously, but Madame Pince paid them no heed and went to fuss, instead, at a couple of first year Hufflepuffs talking too loudly. Blaise glared at Theo. "If you're not going to study, then maybe you should find more suitable activities to quiet your restlessness?" Blaise offered caustically. Theo smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Sorry. Perhaps I am feeling a bit impatient," Theo agreed.

"Whatever for?" Pansy asked as she sat next to Draco. Draco considered moving his books over to make more room for her, but they were all so easily accessible to him as they were and decided that they were really quite fine where they laid. Theo bristled with self-importance and leaned forward towards Pansy wearing an expression of mischief.

"I just feel like this year is going to be my year," Theo replied vaguely. Draco snorted, reading all the possibilities into Theo's words and coming to the conclusion that all would never come to fruition. "Have something to say, Draco?" Theo asked defensively, glancing over at him dubiously. Draco shook his head.

"Of course not," Draco replied with an air of boredom. He suspected that Theo had plans of joining the Slytherin Quidditch team, particularly with the Seeker position in mind. Being Seeker, in turn, would, in Theo's mind, impress a certain someone. Too bad for him, though, because that spot belonged to Draco. Not that Draco wouldn't mind the latter of Theo's plan to go accordingly- It just wasn't very likely.

"Pansy, have you finished your Transfiguration essay?" Theo asked after one more suspicious look to Draco. Pansy huffed indignantly.

"Of course I have," she said, resting her chin on her upturned hand. "And you're a right git if you even think I'm lending you my copy so you can 'go over yours and check for errors'," Pansy said stiffly. Theo smiled nervously.

"What's with the accusation? I was merely inquiring about the status of its completion!" Theo stated.

"That's even more insulting," said Pansy. Blaise smirked over at Theo who slumped back into his chair dejectedly. Draco hadn't been paying attention to the last of the conversation, and was instead watching as Crabbe and Goyle tried to discreetly sneak a cupcake out from- Draco didn't particularly know from where- and eat them between Madam Pince's frequent passes. Surely food wasn't all that Crabbe and Goyle were concerned with?

"Draco? Draco!" Draco glanced over at Pansy who watched him with a glint of offense.

"I was reading, you know," Draco said evenly. Pansy's expression faltered before she smiled at him.

"I was just asking you if you thought Potter could be trusted?" she said, flipping her short, black hair. Theo watched her, mesmerized, while Blaise shook his head disapprovingly.

"What's there not to trust?" Draco asked lazily. "I'm certain the Coles schooled him well in Pureblood formalities."

"That's my point, though. You know as well as I do just what league Connell is part of," Pansy whispered to him.

"Some would call that a conflict of interest on Potter's part or... Oh, I dunno... Suspicious?" Theo threw out there. Draco smiled.

"Yes, I'm sure Harry's well versed in many of the wizarding world's main concerns," Draco agreed.

"Shouldn't that mean something to you?" Blaise asked.

"Not particularly. Everyone's well aware of the concerns of the wizarding world. That's why they're the concerns... of the wizarding world," Draco explained.

"You don't think that they could be up to anything then?" Theo asked. "You know... Potter and the Cole twins-"

"I know who you're talking about," Draco cut in, "and I didn't say anything about not trusting the Cole brothers."

"But Potter's alright?" Theo stated disbelievingly.

"He's in Slytherin, isn't he?"

"Some would say that makes him even more suspicious," Blaise remarked. Pansy and Theo nodded their heads in amusement. "What school did he just come from again?" Blaise asked looking to Pansy for help. Pansy shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know. I've only just ever introduced myself," she said.

"The headmaster said they transferred from America. You think it was the Striwindan Institute?" Theo supplied.

"No, no, no... I think they came from further north," said Blaise. Draco rolled his eyes and was very tempted to rub his temples from annoyance.

"They came from the Alseana Academy of Sorcery," Draco answered blandly. The others looked at him blankly. "It's located in the southern tip of Alaska," Draco clarified.

"We all know where it is, Draco," Theo huffed. Draco rose an eyebrow.

"But they really did?" asked Pansy, sounding a bit awed. "That school has quite a reputation."

"Elite, is what I hear," Blaise smirked.

"Very... official, even," Theo added. "How did you know that?" asked Theo, looking to Draco.

"It's simple... I asked him," answered Draco, tiredly.

"When?" Theo continued.

"During breakfast."

"Did he say anything more about it?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why not?" Theo was being very persistent and quite annoying.

"Because I wasn't interested," Draco said simply.

"Why not, though?" Pansy interjected just as Theo was about to open his mouth again. "I heard that that's where many of the Old Bloods' descendents are."

"So I have heard as well," Draco yawned.

"But you weren't curious enough to inquire further?" Blaise asked him, skeptical. Draco shrugged noncommittally.

"The mail had just arrived then," Draco replied by way of an answer. Theo's expression cooled into one of indifference, and Blaise and Pansy fell silent. Draco knew what they were thinking. "Look, I hardly think Harry is anything to worry about. For Merlin's sake! He couldn't even brew a simple Calming Draught," said Draco. This

whole debate was getting tiresome, and he suddenly remembered that he hadn't quite finished his Transfiguration homework.

"What if it's just an act?" Theo asked conspiratorially. Draco eyed him wearily.

"Well, if you want to stake out his movements, then so be it," Draco said coolly. "I, on the other hand, have more important things to attend to," he said, thinking about his unfinished essay. Theo waved his hand at him, the gesture either saying 'see you later, then,' or, 'what do you know?'. Either way, it annoyed Draco. He gathered his books up, took the ones he thought would be of interesting pursuit, and placed the others back in their respective places.

Without another word or glance, Draco left the library. His friends could contemplate the strangeness that was Harry Potter all they wanted. Draco wouldn't supply them with any of his theories. So with his books in hand, Draco headed towards the Slytherin common room and hoped he could begin to do something more productive.

Harry meandered through the labyrinthine halls of Hogwarts, sensing that he was, indeed, lost. He didn't think the library was this far east of the castle, nor on this high a level. Harry suspected it had something to do with that door he went through. He could have sworn that when he and Malfoy had gone through it earlier in the week, it had led to the grand staircases, but all Harry was finding now were a load of empty classrooms.

His third day at Hogwarts, and he was completely lost, though with how vast the castle was, it'd probably be a long time before Harry knew his way around. Knowing how confusing and sentient Hogwarts was, Harry didn't think that even backtracking his steps at this point would do him any good, so he continued on through the abandoned halls.

It was very eerie. Harry thought that he was the only one walking the halls, and that maybe it was just his loud, echoing footsteps that made him feel as though he was being followed. He glanced over his shoulder briefly but didn't see anyone there. Instead of assuring him, however, it only made him feel more uneasy.

"Let's try this door, then," Harry said aloud, anything to breakup the creepy silence. He opened the door but only another empty

classroom greeted him. As he turned around, he could have sworn he saw something red flash before him which made him jump, but whatever it was had gone too quickly. Maybe it was his mind playing tricks. It wasn't as if Harry had been very calm during his first week of Hogwarts.

Harry breathed out, the hissing sound rising strangely in the silence. Deciding that the only way he was going to get anywhere was by moving on, he tried closed door after closed door, all leading to more empty classrooms, old loos, or- Harry's favorite- just a wall. He was getting tired and started to worry that he was going to be at this all night. Detention for being out past curfew was the least of Harry's concerns. He began to wonder if other students had gotten lost up here and had never found their way out again.

Bemoaning his predicament, Harry wasn't paying attention to anything, not even to the small shadow that crept behind him. It wasn't until a deafening crash sounded ahead that Harry snapped to. Up ahead was none other than Peeves the Poltergeist, breaking what looked like phial after phial, each filled with a viscous, green liquid that was splattering all over the stone floors.

Harry had been fortunate not to have any encounters with the ghost so far, but he had been witness to poor other students victimized by Peeves' nasty pranks. Harry tried to find something to duck behind thinking that being lost was surely better than running into Peeves, when as he turned around, he caught sight of the red he had glimpse briefly before.

He gasped in surprise, partly because he had been caught off guard, and partly because the red were the gleaming eyes of the vigilant cat, Mrs. Norris. Harry inwardly groaned. The cat was just as much trouble as Peeves because whenever Mrs. Norris showed up, her caretaker, Filch, was soon to follow, and with Peeves making as much noise as he was, Filch was definitely on his way. Filch had been given an introduction at the Sorting Feast- according to Edward; Harry hadn't been all too attentive during Dumbledore's speeches- and the general consensus among the students was that Filch was another person never to cross.

As Harry contemplated between staying where he was or making a run for one of the infinite abandoned classrooms, the green ooze spilling out of the broken phials began to smolder and stink

something foul. Harry decided to seek refuge in an empty classroom, but just as his mind was made up, Filch came stepping out through a random door.

"Peeves! I'll have you thrown out for good this time!" the old man shouted as he rushed forward. The Poltergeist stopped breaking the glass and cackled.

"Peeves was behaving. Students shouldn't mess with such nasty potions!" the ghost laughed. Filch was about to shout anew when he caught sight of Harry who was standing there looking ashen.

"What's this, my sweets?" Filch asked as Mrs. Norris bounded up next to her owner. Filch had completely disregarded Peeves. Harry cursed his foul luck. "Students wandering around in abandoned corridors? Looks fishy, doesn't my love?" he asked the cat. Harry didn't know whether to respond or not, seeing as how Filch was apparently addressing his cat, but Harry felt he should at least clarify whatever accusations Filch was making.

"Ooh! Naughty student, straying so far," Peeves sniggered, floating above Harry's head.

"I got lost..." Harry began, "-sir," he added quickly, not knowing how to address Filch.

"Lost, he says? Lost? Lost? Lost?" Peeves repeated, circling above. The noxious fumes of the spreading ooze began to form into a dark cloud of smoke.

"Did you make this mess?" Filch shouted, waving his fist in the air. Harry would have liked to respond but the smell was making him gag, and he didn't think he'd be able to say much anyways with his hands clamped over his nose and mouth. He shook his head frantically instead. Peeves began singing some sailor song, the lyrics having something to do with Harry being lost amongst the sea of slime and more bits about how no one would come looking for an, 'ickle-Slytherin- Nobody likes them.'

"Alright, Peeves!" Filch roared, and Harry wondered how Filch wasn't doubling over from sickness. Harry had his nose stopped up and still he was about to topple over from nausea. "When I get back, you'd better have cleaned up this mess or I swear it- I'll get the

headmaster to expel you!" Peeves smiled wickedly and swooped down close to Mrs. Norris who swatted at him unsuccessfully. Filch turned to a greening Harry. "You! Come with me!"

Harry nodded his head in obedience, being only too grateful to finally get out of the malodorous bog. He padded behind the limping Filch, Mrs. Norris keeping her scarlet eyes fixed on Harry like, at any moment, he was going to try and escape.

"Rotten Peeves! Oh I'll have him out of this school! Out for good!" Harry listened warily, thinking that Filch was perhaps a tad off his rocker. He thought he could have made a break for it, too, if only the cat weren't watching him so closely. How did Filch train the cat so well anyhow?

To Harry's relief, they finally emerged from the forsaken corridors right into the grand staircases. Down and down they went, Filch grumbling to himself about Peeves; Mrs. Norris tipping down the stairs gracefully; and Harry moving cautiously, wandering where Filch was leading him. When they reached the main floor, Harry was surprised to find the halls quite empty. Peering about as he followed behind Filch, only a few older students were about, and many of them were probably Prefects. Harry didn't think he had been trapped that long in the abandoned corridors and hoped that Filch was just leading him to the Slytherin house and not to write him up for being out past curfew.

"Um... sir- where are we going?" Harry asked tentatively. Filch grumbled a few more things about Peeves before looking at Harry with one squinty eye.

"To the dungeons," he said, giving a gruesome smile. Harry didn't know why Filch looked so happy about it... Unless he was taking Harry directly to Snape's office. Harry gulped convulsively. He had managed to avoid the Potions teacher so far, only having Potions once so far during his first week, and it seemed the man didn't prefer to attend the less formal dinners of Hogwarts meaning Harry had seen little of Snape, but it looked as if Harry's good fortune was about to run out.

His hands became very clammy, and his forehead felt warm with perspiration. With each step that Harry took, his heart began to thud more viciously in his chest until the hammering worked its way up

and up and into his head. He clenched and unclenched his hands and tried to tell himself that Filch was really only leading him back to the Slytherins common room so that he could make sure that Harry was where he needed to be. It wasn't working very effectively.

They descended a few more flights of steps, but instead of turning right which would have taken them to Snape's office, they continued downwards. Now Harry was really confused, and didn't have enough time to assess the change before he was whisked away into a dingy room filled with all kinds of wooded filing cabinets along the walls. Catching himself, Harry realized that Filch had taken him to his office, and Harry felt a bizarre mixture of relief and dread.

"Tired of having students making a mess of this school," Filch was saying as he strode to a small desk in the center of the room where, suspended above, there gleamed many chains and shackles. Harry felt a small shiver run down his spine. "Mucking it up... messes... stinking messes..."

"Sir, I- uh... I didn't make that mess," Harry began.

"I bet you gave all those potions phials to Peeves," Filch accused, shuffling through the papers on his desk for a bit of parchment.

"No! I don't even know where he got them from," but that probably wasn't the best thing to shout out because Filch looked over at him knowingly.

"You stole them from Professor Snape, of course." Harry swore he could feel the blood drain from his face. He couldn't even scramble together enough words to protest. What had started out as an innocent trip to the library on a Wednesday night, turned into a continuing wayward flux between good and ill fortune.

"Name... is... What's your name?" Filch demanded as he stooped over Harry's doom sentence.

"Harry... Po- Potter... sir," he stammered.

"Potter, Harry," Filch repeated as he scribbled away on the parchment. "Crime?... making... a mess... in the third... floor... corridors," Filch read aloud as he wrote. Harry shook his head in objection but didn't think Filch was paying much attention to him.

Harry stepped forward thinking that he had to be closer in order to be heard when a huge explosion went off, rattling the chains and knocking dust off from the ceiling. Harry jumped slightly and Filch's hand jerked across the parchment leaving a blotted trail of black ink.

Mrs. Norris was bounding out through the door and up the stairs just as her master, after a few slurs of swearing, followed.

"I know it's Peeves. I'll have him out of here this time for sure!" Filch was shouting as he disappeared past the door and up the steps. Harry had no idea what to do. A vast majority of him told him this was his chance to get away, but another part told him he get into even more trouble leaving. He then considered sitting in a chair but thought better when he saw that they looked more suitable for interrogation than comfort.

"What's this then?" came a voice through the doorway.

"Made a perfect distraction for him and he doesn't take the opportunity," came another and similar voice. In stepped a very amused and triumphant Fred and George.

"I don't know whether to be insulted or touched by his good manners for staying," one twin said.

"I'm rather appalled, Fred," said the other. "Who in their right mind stays in here?"

"Right you are... Suppose we'll have to teach Harry here how it's done." They nonchalantly strode over to Filch's desk where they took the parchment Filch had been writing on.

"Making a mess on the third floor?" George said.

"We're terribly disappointed in you," Fred chided, "... for getting caught."

"No... it wasn't me. Peeves and phials... he made the mess," Harry said defensively. There came another BANG!, this time from above the room.

"Relax, Harry," Fred said, pocketing the parchment and paying the ruckus no mind.

"We know all too well how quick Filch is to accuse," George said as he looked about the room wistfully. "Oh look, brother. Our memoirs," he said going over the filing cabinet where a whole drawer was dedicated to them with a little white label saying so. "Wow... a whole drawer..."

"Bloody fantastic," Fred said joyously behind his brother. "Well no time to relive them now, brother."

"Right. Come on, Harry," George said waving Harry to follow them. Harry made to move but he stopped.

"But won't this get me into more trouble? I mean... Just leaving..." Harry trailed off looking at the door longingly. He did catch Fred and George exchanging a brief smile.

"Oh he won't remember anyway," George said.

"And seeing as how we've just collected his only reminder," Fred said, patting his pocket, "you won't be getting into any trouble. Now come on before he does come back and we'll all be strung up on those chains by our noses." Harry needed no more encouragement and followed the Weasley twins out of the office.

They journeyed through the more abandoned corridors of the dungeons, none of which looked familiar to Harry. He just thought that the Weasley twins didn't want to take the same route just in case they ran into Filch and had opted to take a more... confusing passage instead.

"Now where is it again?" Fred asked as they came to a dead end.

"Should be here," George supplied.

"Should be," Fred agreed.

"If we had that we could remember better," George said sliding a hand along the stone wall.

"Yeah, well we don't," Fred answered. "Oy! Harry! Don't just stand there!" Harry started a bit.

"Yeah, hop to!" George said as the two brothers got on their hands and knees and began groping along the bottom of the wall. Harry stood there for a second wondering if touching the wall in a certain pattern would open up to reveal a new passage like in Diagon. Then again, maybe Fred and George were just confused. To be safe, though, Harry began running a hand along the middle part of the dead-end wall.

"Hmm... you think we messed up?" George asked.

"How could you ever ask such a thing?" Fred asked appalled, his head bent at a funny angle against the floor as he surveyed the wall from upside-down.

"I was only saying..."

Harry didn't like that because that just meant he had traded being lost on one of the upper floors to being lost in the dungeons, and he had rather be lost on the upper floors. It was at least less slimy... and Snape-ish. But he continued at his pointless task while Fred and George argued with their heads bent upside-down. Cold stone after cold stone was all Harry felt until his finger fell into a small groove. It wouldn't have been so unusual if the groove wasn't so perfectly rounded and getting larger every time Harry wriggled his finger in it.

"Ah! There it is!" George exclaimed, leaping up. He reached for a random spot on the wall and began doing the same thing Harry was, only nothing was happening where George was touching. Harry's spot, however, kept growing and growing until a hole just large enough to peep through to appeared.

"No, you git. He's found it," Fred said. "Way to go. A natural, I'd say," said Fred approvingly, coming beside Harry. George nodded his head and smiling at Harry, he reached his arm through the small hole and groped along the back side of the wall. He must have found something because he grinned and then there was a click inside the wall. George removed his arm and then the hole grew even larger so that a person could crawl through.

"After you, Master Potter," Fred said with a sly smile. Harry may have been more apprehensive if he wasn't so anxious to get back to more familiar territory, so he climbed through. Ahead was a rickety wooden staircase that Harry was sure didn't belong there, but Fred

and George seemed content and walked up it with no worries. Harry put a foot on the first step wondering if the squeaky steps were as deceptive as the moving staircases.

They climbed up and up the tight, winding stairwell (Fred and George having to duck low most of the way up) and then squeezed out of another small hole in the corner of a wall into what looked like a broom closet.

"Here we are," George said, opening the door out into a very abandoned and very familiar corridor. Harry peeked over George's shoulder and groaned. Why had they taken him right back to starting point?

"Cheer up, Harry," Fred said, giving his brother a confused expression. George shrugged his shoulders.

"This is where I got lost, and where Peeves was, and then Filch," Harry explained as he scanned the hall nervously.

"Give us some credit! Filch won't be walking up here anytime soon," Fred said vaguely.

"Not only are we good for a bust-out," George began.

"-but as a duo of diversion as well," Fred beamed. "Come on now. We'll get you to the library."

"You mean it's not passed curfew?" Harry asked amazed. Fred and George exchanged bewildered glances before turning to Harry.

"Supper hasn't even started," George stated.

"You've got loads of time," Fred added. Harry sighed in relief, and laughed quietly, happy to be rid of Peeves, bogs, Filch, and dank dungeons. Harry was about to give his thanks to the Weasley twins when something occurred to him.

"How did you know I wanted to go to the library?" Harry asked. Fred shrugged.

"Lucky guess," George stated, and neither brother said anything more on the matter. Harry thought it was strange but not too strange to where he'd let it bother him so much, so he, too, let it drop.

After they cleared the corridors and descended down the main staircase a floor (distant popping noises could still be heard), Fred and George said farewell and dropped Harry off at the library room. Again, Harry was going to call out his thanks when, yet again, another thought occurred to him. How did they know he had been caught by Filch?

Deciding that they just must have seen Filch leading Harry down to the dungeons, Harry happily entered the library and searched for a good table.

Harry tried to ignore the incessant tapping, but that was easier said than done. He had hoped for a quiet reading so he could keep apace with the homework, but he couldn't seem to get anything done with that drumming. He glared at the finger doing the beating as it went up and then down, up and then down, over and over and over.

"I'm sorry, but could you please-" Harry began to say.

"What? I wasn't listening," Malfoy yawned. "Did you say something?" Harry felt his jaw tighten slightly, but he shook his head calmly.

"I was just going to ask if you could please stop that. I can't concentrate," Harry said. Malfoy had joined him in the library only five minutes after Harry had settled at a table. Harry was sure Malfoy had been at the library earlier, and when he asked Malfoy this, Malfoy had looked at him pointedly and stated that he wanted to make sure all his homework was completed and accurate and the library was the best place for that. Harry had really wanted to ask why that meant Malfoy had to sit by him, but kept his mouth shut.

"What are you reading?" Malfoy asked, looking over at Harry's book and completely skirting around any sort of apology. Not that Harry had expected one. He was just glad Malfoy had stopped.

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts required reading," Harry answered. He skimmed the page he had been trying to read before

Malfoy had begun his relentless tapping, and found to his dismay, that he still couldn't read it. The book... it was just so...

"- ridiculous."

"What?" Harry asked, snapping to. Draco sighed.

"I said, those books are ridiculous." Harry looked down at his book cover where Lockhart was beaming at him with his oh-so-unnaturally white teeth. He decided that reading it was a lost cause and swept the book back into his backpack to swap it for his transfiguration book. At least that way he could get his essay done. "We've been fortunate not to have that class, but we'll have it tomorrow," Malfoy said contemptuously. "I'm just looking forward to Saturday."

"Why? What's happening Saturday?" Harry couldn't help but ask. Malfoy looked at him sympathetically which irritated Harry.

"It's the weekend, of course," Malfoy replied. Harry gave a quiet, 'oh,' and went back to reading. He felt Malfoy had just kept something to himself, but Harry didn't really care. He probably should, but he didn't. He, too, couldn't wait for Saturday if only because that meant no more classes... at least for two days. He could hang out with Alex and Edward, too; Harry was really looking forward to that.

"What was it like at Alseana?" Malfoy asked him. Harry really didn't feel like talking, but it seemed that Malfoy did. His stare never wavered as he waited for Harry to answer, and Harry had never liked being put on the spot like that. He caved in and replied.

"It was like every other school."

"You can't really say that because you haven't been to that many schools," Malfoy stated. "Or have you?"

"No- you're right, just two," Harry said.

"Alseana and Hogwarts," Malfoy clarified.

"Oh well, then three," Harry corrected. Malfoy furrowed his brows.

"Wait, what other one?" he asked. Harry tensed a little wondering if he had perhaps spoken too much. Then he figured if he was to look less... well, like he was up to something, he maybe should be more forthcoming. It was just talk about schools. No harm done there, right?

"I went to a muggle school first," Harry answered, pretending to read over his transfiguration book. Malfoy gave a small gasp which, because he had never thought Malfoy would be one to make such a noise, made Harry look up surprised.

"A muggle school?" Malfoy repeated. "You've got to be joking." Harry didn't miss the disgust with which the comment was made, and that angered him a little.

"No. Why would I joke about that?"

"But why would the Coles put you in a muggle school?"

"They didn't," Harry answered simply. Malfoy stared at him to continue on. Harry sighed. "I used to live with my aunt and uncle."

"And they sent you to a... muggle school?" Malfoy sounded utterly scandalized.

"Where else would they have sent me?" Harry asked. Then he really thought about it and came up with a lot of places those people would have probably preferred to send him to. None of which were even remotely appealing.

"To, I don't know... say, a wizarding school? Hogwarts? Alseana?" Malfoy replied exasperatedly.

"Maybe... If they were wizards," Harry explained. It was funny how such a simple statement made Malfoy gasp with such horridification. Harry couldn't help but snort in amusement. Malfoy must have realized that he had showed such emotion, and pulled it back so smoothly, one would never have thought the other expression had been there at all. Harry dared to admit he was a little amazed.

"So they were... muggles?" Malfoy actually swallowed as if he had just eaten into something foul.

"That is an alternative to being a wizard," Harry said.

"Don't tell me they knew the Coles?" Even as he said it, the look on Malfoy's face said he wouldn't believe it even if it were true. Despite himself, Harry actually gave a small laugh. The thought of his aunt and uncle associating with the Coles- That was way to funny.

"Merlin, no! It's quite the opposite. They hated anything that, I guess, to them, was... unnatural," Harry laughed. Malfoy narrowed his eyes.

"Like you?" Harry stopped laughing and looked at Malfoy confusedly.

"It's not a big deal. I didn't have to stay with them long," Harry said by way of an answer. He flipped through his book, this time, not to concentrate on reading but to distract himself from the turn in the conversation. Malfoy was too astute.

"Did the Coles come and save you?" Malfoy asked. Harry didn't like that word- save- nor did he like that he couldn't tell what context that word was used in.

"No, we had a neighbor- She was a witch- and I guess she had never liked the Dursleys-

"Dursleys?"

"That's them- my aunt and uncle. Well, she must have been friends with Remus who knew the Coles and who told them about me, and then Mr. Cole agreed to take me in." Even as Harry explained it, and though it was what he knew to be true, he couldn't help but think that it sounded a bit-

"Strange..." came Malfoy. Harry could feel his eyes widen slightly.

"I guess," he laughed nervously. It wasn't all that strange. It could happen. That neighbor witch, Remus, and Mr. Cole... they all just took pity on Harry. It wasn't as if his situation with the Dursleys was utterly abysmal (Harry knew that things could always be worse), but it wasn't as if it was very happy either. Harry was grateful for the Coles' sympathy because he was able to meet Alex and Edward. That alone almost completely obliterated the time he had spent with the Dursleys.

"I just didn't think that such a thing really happened," Malfoy added contemplatively. Harry knew what he meant. From Malfoy's standpoint, a no-name wizard being adopted by purebloods like the Coles? Harry supposed that at that instance, the whole thing really was kind of strange then. "I mean for there to be places where wizards actually agree to live in the same place as... muggles-!" Malfoy let the statement trail and shuddered with disgust. Harry blinked in surprise. He didn't think Malfoy was going to say that.

"Of course there are. There are loads of places," Harry stated. Malfoy shook his head like such a thing was only lore and not reality. Harry thought he looked like a little kid. It made him feel a little more at ease.

"No way that can be! I mean, with the ministries rules about magic not to be done in front of muggles, and then wizards living there-" he sighed. "That's so stupid." Harry laughed. Malfoy did have a point, but that witch he had talked about wasn't really effective with magic anyway. He didn't tell Malfoy that, though, because it was way funnier to see Malfoy acting like an offended brat.

By chance, just as Harry looked down at the book he had been inattentively flipping through, he found the one passage he needed to complete his essay. He read over it all and felt like slapping his forehead. He should have known that. Theoretically, picturing a transfiguration in your head has little to do with the action of transfiguring. It all came to motion of wand, incantation, and a strong will. Harry disagreed, a little. One had to picture so the end result one wanted was clearer, and if that was clearer, the more confident one was. If one was confident, their will was stronger. It all ties in.

He told himself that it was only because he wasn't being his usual self that made him forget such a simple thing. He reached into his backpack, leafed through the parchment, found his essay, yanked it out, and began writing. He wrote with such determination that he had completely forgotten about Malfoy. That was until-

"What happened to your parents?" And just like that, the tip of Harry's quill stopped writing, his hand frozen above the parchment. He didn't answer at first, just sat staring at the last five words he had written.

"They died," he said simply. When he realized that Malfoy didn't seem satisfied with that answer, he added, "- in a car accident." That's all he said, all he wanted to say, but really... all he could say. That's what the Dursleys had told him, what Remus had said, and what Mr. Cole had confirmed. Even Hagrid, without Harry even asking, had told him the same thing once.

Malfoy gave a quiet, "hmm..." to himself, but that's all he said. Harry peeked at him through the dark fringe that fell into his eyes, his head bowed down, but Malfoy wasn't looking at him. He was staring absentmindedly at a shelf of books. Harry's stomach tightened, and his heart sped.

"Oh!" Harry gasped. Malfoy glanced at him quickly. "I forgot to ask Alex something! I'll see you later," Harry said quickly as he shoved all his things into his backpack. Malfoy nodded his head, and then Harry left the table, gave a courtesy nod to Madame Pince, and was out the door. It wasn't until he was a safe distance away from the library and Malfoy that he let himself feel panicked. He turned the corridor, grateful that no one ever seemed to wander these halls so late, and rested his head against the cool, stone wall.

Why was he reacting like this? It was no big deal. He had to converse like that so that he wouldn't stand out or raise concern... or whatever it was he was trying to avoid. Malfoy didn't know better. He was just honestly curious. He just happened to strike a nerve in Harry, was all. Harry hadn't spilled anything he shouldn't have, so he shouldn't feel as dreadful as he did. Harry let out a ball of air and felt the warmth of his breath hit him in his face.

Honestly! He shouldn't have acted like such a cornered animal. Talking about your parents should be natural and not wrecking... like he was suspicious because he didn't know anything. Harry hoped Malfoy didn't notice anything, but Malfoy had never seemed to be... unintuitive, so...

Harry should just apologize- say he was sorry and that he never like talking about his parents because he didn't know them. Malfoy should be satisfied with that. It was the truth after all.

Encouraged by his decision, Harry headed for the Slytherin common room. He had missed supper, but that wasn't a big deal to him. He wasn't very hungry anyway. Trying to get through those damn

defense books of Lockhart's had seemed more important, but it wasn't a total waste. Harry had just about completed his transfiguration essay and was certain that McGonagall would be pleased with it.

Descending the tricky moving staircases and being careful to avoid the vanishing step, he headed to the dungeons. Once he reached the Entrance Hall, he turned as what about to head down the side stairs when his name was called.

"Ah, Harry! You missed supper!"

Harry turned around and saw the headmaster looking at him with his bright, blue eyes.

"S-sorry," Harry stammered, not knowing how to reply. Dumbledore gave a chuckle and stepped nearer.

"No need to apologize. I've been there myself, a long time ago. Skipping meals for academic pursuit... Just don't skip too many or I'm afraid you'll vanish, my boy!" Dumbledore laughed as he patted Harry's shoulder. Harry smiled confusedly. Was it possible to vanish from Hogwarts if you didn't eat? Harry shook his head for such a dumb thought.

"How are you adjusting to Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked him.

"Oh, well- I like it a lot," Harry lied. Dumbledore's blue eyes seemed to look through him, so Harry avoided eye contact. "I just miss Alseana," he lied again. It wasn't that he didn't miss his old school, it was just that Hogwarts was nerve-wracking.

"New schools are always difficult, but I think you'll find that in time, you'll like it here very much," Dumbledore said as he smiled down at Harry. He tapped his nose and turned on his heels and headed for the grand, moving stairwell.

"Night, Headmaster," Harry said, feeling bewildered.

"Yes, yes. Goodnight!" and he climbed the stairs slowly, humming some unrecognizable tune to himself. Harry followed suit but made his way downwards. He meandered through the dungeon halls until he came to a dead end. He said the password, and the stone wall

shifted sideways. He entered the common room and was surprised to find that he didn't find the space as cold as he did the first night.

"Potter! Come here a second!" came Nott's voice. Harry turned and found Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, and Millicent Bulstrode hovering over a table. He made his way over to them uncertain of what they wanted. He had only met each of them briefly the first night and hadn't spoken much more to them since.

"What do you make of this?" Nott asked him as Harry stopped beside Millicent and him, and Harry saw that they were all staring into a cauldron.

"I told him it was way too viscous to be of any use," Zabini coolly said, his dark eyes narrowed at the cauldron.

"We all know you're thoughts, Blaise," Nott replied gruffly. "I wanna know what Potter here thinks." Harry peeked inside. The liquid was indeed very thick... and very purple.

"Is this..." but Harry trailed off as he looked in closer.

"He's not going to agree," came the deep voice of Bulstrode. Nott hushed her impatiently.

"You forgot the billywig," Harry said glancing up at Nott.

"What- You sure?" Nott looked into the cauldron, grabbed the stirrer, and gave the liquid a few good whisks.

"You know?" Zabini said evenly. "He's right."

"Damn," Nott hissed as he glared into the cauldron.

"Why are you making a cure for stomach aches?" Harry asked.

"The gits Goyle and Crabbe over there have stomach pains," Nott muttered. "Big surprise there..." He looked one last time into the cauldron before vanishing the failed cure. "Well, that was time well spent," Nott grunted.

"Lessons are always time well spent," Zabini smiled.

"Don't act so smug. It wasn't like you knew where I messed up at," Nott glared.

"That was impressive, Harry," Zabini said, ignoring Nott. Harry shook his head.

"Not really..." he mumbled.

"But you pinpointed the exact thing that Theo there forgot," Bulstrode supplied.

"I thought maybe you wouldn't be so... adapt in potions," Zabini said thoughtfully.

"Why's that?" Harry asked, peeved that Zabini would make such a remark.

"Because you struggled in potions class the other day," he replied. Harry didn't say anything. His stomach knotted, and he couldn't argue that point. After all, he had struggled. He just didn't like that fact that Zabini, and probably the other second year Slytherins, had noticed.

"It was a lucky guess," Harry said. He left them there as Nott and Zabini got into a discussion of how useless Nott's potion-making was. He climbed down a couple of stairs, opened the door to the boys dormitories, dropped his backpack on the ground, and collapsed on his bed.

He was really going to have to try a lot harder- at everything, it seemed.

The fire gave off a bright light in the dark parlor, and Connell stared intently within the flickering flames until he could almost see shapes forming in the blaze. To his right, rested many letters. Some of them were the usual, sycophantic nonsense pleading Connell to speak with the Patriarch about their trivial politics while others were from his informants. Not that any of those were very enlightening, all saying the same thing,

"No current updates-"

There was one, however, that had piqued his interest. He hadn't expected one of his boys to write so quickly. Reaching over, he picked up the topmost letter and read over it again. It really wasn't a surprise that the first letter was from Harry; it was only surprising that it had come so soon. Alex, the dear lad, would need much more time for his confidences to grow, and Edward- Well, Edward had always been a bit more stubborn. Harry had written, though.

The letter didn't tell him anything he wasn't already aware of: Severus was the Potions Master; he was head of the Slytherin House; his disposition is surly and acrid... Connell sighed. Harry was nervous. In time, Connell was sure that Harry would be one of his best suppliants, whether the boy would know it or not.

He never would have predicted that Harry would end up in Slytherin (of all places). He was certain that all three of the boys would have gone into Ravenclaw. He curbed his disappointment (Rona would be pleased to know that her boys followed her footsteps into Gryffindor) now knowing otherwise- Edward and Alex not being in Ravenclaw only stung at what were his wishes- but Harry being in Slytherin...

That was unforeseen.

But it would work. Connell had never been... fond of that house nor of the students, but there were some of them that proved to be of higher caliber. Three of his comrades were alumni from the House of Slytherin, and they had done nothing to warrant Connell's distrust... yet, at least. It was just the vast majority of them had a love for the darker arts that always grew into insatiable greed for power.

... like the Deatheaters.

Harry would be different, though. The boy had the potential to be cunning, manipulative... ambitious- Those were some of the very reasons it was decided that Harry would be the one to trail Severus- but among those traits, Harry always had the earnestness and humbleness that made him... incorruptible. The Dursleys were the ones to be thanked for that. Him and Dumbledore had once discussed what Harry might have been if he had not been raised by such strict muggles.

Not that Connell approved of the vermin relations of Harry, he just had the attitude of what-was-done-was-done. Harry had the underlying feel of power, and not the potential of being powerful, just raw power sunken deep within him. It had been alarming to have felt it's depth the few times Harry had had a magical mishap. Connell hated the Dursleys and their emotional, and physical, abuse of Harry, but secretly, and guiltily, his was thankful that their hatred of wizardry had stunted Harry's magical maturity.

All this the Order of Rowan had discussed, meticulously. Each member voiced his or her concern, each concern was considered, and in the end, Harry had been deemed worthy of such a task. Connell wouldn't feel guilty at asking so much from his sons and Harry. The three of them were exceptional, and this world was as every bit theirs as it was his, and Rona's, and the Order of Rowan's, and all the wizarding world. But unlike so many of the wizarding community, Alex, Edward, and Harry would partake.

In the past couple of years, more and more letters spoke of a rise in the practice of the dark arts, attacks on muggles, and sometimes the letters spoke of individuals caught uttering one of the Unforgivable Curses. Those curses, those rises in dark arts usage, those attacks on muggles- many of them were committed in the name of the Dark Lord. That's why Rowan needed a pair of ears, a pair of eyes, several pairs, in fact.

The Order of Rowan was an organization sworn to the protection of the wizarding community, and not just Britain's, or the America's, but the entire world's. To do that, they needed informants who could leak to the Order suspicious activities, so that measures could be taken to prevent anything catastrophic from occurring. No one needed a second Great War, a second... Voldemort.

Connell shuddered at the mere thought of that evil being.

He flicked the corner of Harry's letter that he still held onto and gazed into the fire. No, he wouldn't feel guilty for asking the three boys to help prevent such evils from ever happening again. Hogwarts had been the hub for the Great War. That's where the Dark Lord had wormed out of, where his feculent Deatheaters had come from, where Severus still lingered, and where, Connell was sure, many fledgling Deatheaters attended.

Connell had great admiration for Albus Dumbledore. The legendary mage had fought and bested his own many shares of evil wizards, but the legend was getting on in years. Connell had met with the wizard on occasion in the last few years and was nonplussed to find that the man, when given the opportunity to chat on without interruption, would veer off into topics Connell had no references for (like lemon candies...). In addition, the wizard harbored a "reformed" Deatheater on the basis the man had apologized. What could Dumbledore be thinking?

The man had a generous heart, but not everyone can be saved nor forgiven. For that reason, Connell had kept from Dumbledore the truest of reasons as to why his sons and Harry were attending that school.

The Dark Lord had been vanquished (the wizarding world could never repay Neville Longbottom for that), but the disease and corruptness of his malice still lingered like a disease, one that needed to be eradicated.

For that, he needed a pair of eyes, a pair of ears, to see, to hear, to learn, to be informed.

Putting Harry's letter back down, Connell uncorked a bottle of his favorite merlot, poured himself a glass, sipped it slowly, and stared into the now dying flames.

"Oh come on Neville! You've got to try this one!" Edward exclaimed, handing the nervous boy a flavored jellybean.

"I wouldn't do it, Nevs," Ron said darkly from behind Neville, eyeing the sugar candy like it was poison.

"Quiet Ron! Just because you got vomit flavored doesn't mean Neville will," Edward said. Neville nodded his head and slowly took the candy. Edward watched as the boy put it to his mouth tentatively and with a sigh of conviction, pop it into his mouth. It shouldn't be this suspenseful, watching someone eat a piece of candy, but usually candy wasn't Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, and the diabolicalness of the unassuming candy was exactly why it was so gripping.

Neville gave a few chews; everyone leaned forward, and then Neville gave groan of disgust and swallowed the candy resentfully.

"Ah no! It was vomit flavored, wasn't it?" Ron asked, covering his freckled face in his hands. Seamus Finnigan, a fidgety boy with a heavy Irish accent, doubled over in hysterics, while his best mate, a quiet, unassuming boy named Dean Thomas watched his friend in concern.

"No, no... I think it... I think it was... wart flavored," Neville gasped after he had managed to get the candy down.

"Wart flavored?" Alex repeated. "How can there be a wart flavor?" Alex snatched the candy box from Edward's hands and scanned over the box. Edward knew there wouldn't be any mention of wart flavoring, so Alex was wasting his time.

"What does wart even taste like?" Dean asked, nudging Seamus in the shoulder to ask if the boy was alright.

"Not very good, I'm afraid," Neville answered with a sickly expression on his face.

"Why'd you swallow it then?" asked Dean, shocked.

"I- I thought we had to as part of the game," said Neville timidly.

"Didn't you see Ron spit out his vomit one?" Seamus asked in between chuckles.

"I swallowed mine too. That's how a man does it!" Ron exclaimed passionately.

"Real men don't sit around daring others to eat candy," Dean said.

"Then we'll all skip your turn, oh manly one," Seamus sniggered as he gestured for Alex to hand him the box. Alex passed it over, and Seamus dumped a couple jellybeans into his hand. "Pick one," he said to Alex. Alex looked over them all and picking the one Edward knew Alex thought to be the less suspicious looking one, ate it. Alex should know that the least questioning ones were always the ones to be wary of, and sure enough after a few chews, Alex had turned a peaky green.

"Alright there, Alex?" Edward laughed. Alex gave a hard swallow and covered his mouth like he was going to be sick. Dean, Seamus, and Ron all gave amusing exclamations of, 'oh no! He's going to be sick,' and backed away a safe distance. But Alex remained cool and after a moment, the color returned to his face.

"That bad, eh?" Edward asked.

"You have no idea. I'm not even sure what flavor that was... Probably sour milk, or moldy cheese-

"Cheese is already moldy-" Edward interjected.

"- or garbage flavor," Alex finished.

"I think I had that once," Seamus said gravely. "Made me sick for a whole day."

"Nasty stuff, that is," Ron said, shaking his head solemnly.

"Now it's Edward's turn," Neville said. Edward smiled and pounded his chest.

"I can handle it!" he proclaimed bravely.

"Oh please..." Alex muttered, still covering his mouth like a sickly girl. Edward would show him.

"Pick one out then," Seamus ordered, holding out his hand. Edward found one that was yellowy with darker splotches of brown on it, and hoped that it was a biscuit flavored one. Without hesitation (as a real man does it) he put the candy in his mouth, bit into it, and munched on it. To his dismay, it was not a biscuit flavored bean.

"Well? How is it?" Neville asked him. Edward, since he was little, always had a heightened sense of taste, so in reality, this game was more severe for him. That made him more manly than the other five because he still dared to partake in the consumption of offensive candy.

"Maybe he can't talk or he'll be sick," Dean said slowly, watching Edward cautiously.

It's true. Edward had been so fortunate as to choose rotten egg, and to avoid losing his dinner he swallowed the candy quickly. His taste buds were not enjoying the overpowering stank of rotten eggs.

"Well, that was hellish," Edward said, smiling.

"It looked like rotten egg," Ron said.

"That's because it was," said Edward, grimacing. The five other boys groaned their condolences to Edward for having such nasty luck. Rotten egg, in Dean and Neville's opinion, was the worst flavor.

"Well, that's enough of that," Dean exclaimed, getting up and crawling into his bed.

"Yeah, I think you're right, mate," Seamus agreed as he climbed into his own four-poster bed. The four other boys wordlessly slipped into theirs, the lights were turned off, and each tried to fall asleep. Edward wasn't yet sleepy and rather than forcing himself to sleep, he crept out of bed, grabbed a book, tiptoed down the stairs, and chose the comfiest chair by the fire to read by.

Edward had hoped to learn more about Hogwarts by reading *Hogwarts: A History* (the castle was insistent on making Edward lost at any given moment), but it was just way too late in the evening for the book to be of any interest. Looking at nothing was way more enthralling... sort of.

Minutes ticked by and still Edward wasn't tired, and looking at nothing in particular was starting to dry his eyes out. He considered going to sit by a window when he heard a creaking behind him. He knew who it was before he ever looked at the person.

"You're up late, Neville," Edward said, shifting into a more comfortable position in the chair. Neville gave a nervous laugh.

"How'd you know it was me?" he asked, coming round into view and choosing the chair opposite of Edward. Edward surveyed him. The boy was wearing blue flannel pajamas with hand stitched toads hopping all over the clothing. Edward was baffled (and mystified) by how ordinary Neville always seemed, no matter the hook shaped

scar on his throat, the only reminder that he had been witness to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's frightful power.

"I saw you coming down the stairs," Edward lied, looking into the fireplace. He hadn't seen Neville; he was just always really aware of other people's presences.

"Oh," Neville said, scooting closer to the dying fire. "Guess I wasn't very quiet then."

"Trying to sneak up on me?" Edward asked, giving a toothy grin.

"No, I just didn't want to wake you if you were asleep," he explained quietly. He looked up at Edward apologetically. "I didn't wake you up, did I? Sorry..." he muttered. Edward blinked a couple of times, and then he laughed.

"You know how to play chess?" he asked randomly.

"I do, but I'm not very good. Gran always told me I don't pay enough attention to what I'm doing," Neville answered.

"I'm not very good either. Harry always beats me," Edward said, getting up and walking over to an old armoire.

"That's your other brother, right?" Neville asked him.

"Yeah... he was adopted into our family," Edward explained as he searched the cupboard.

"Are you sad he isn't in Gryffindor?"

"Do you mean am I sad he's in Slytherin?" Edward asked peeking over at Neville. Neville blushed and twisted the hem of his night shirt. His hook shaped scar gleamed in the flickering light of the fireplace, and Edward felt guilty for staring at it. He went back to searching.

"N-no, I didn't mean that. It's just... if- if I had a brother, I would want to be in the same house as him," Neville stammered. Edward smiled, thinking that even though Neville was the great child- savior, he was also really kind. He pulled out a chess set he was finally able to find and padded on back to where him and Neville were sitting. He set it

up on a table they'd move between them, and with Neville as white, they played.

"I can't wait for Saturday," Edward commented as he moved his knight.

"Going to join the Quidditch team?" Neville asked as he studied the chess board.

"I'm going to make chaser," Edward said, proudly.

"I'd want to, but I'm no good on a broom. Gran says I have no balance," Neville muttered, moving a pawn. Edward grinned, thinking that Neville's grandmother must be one formidable woman. She had to be, though, to protect Neville.

Edward silently promised to be just as strong, if not stronger. Then he moved his queen and put the Boy-Who-Lived in check.

A/N: an update so soon? Hmm... must be trick of the light. And did anyone else think that Filch there almost sounded like Gollum at times? Just me then? Yeah... thought so. Well, I hope you guys enjoyed. Only a little was revealed, I know, but don't worry. More will come!

Chapter 7: Letters, Mishaps, and Potions

Harry fidgeted restlessly in his seat. He hadn't slept well last night and was struggling with not yawning over his bowl of porridge every ten seconds. Being in a dorm filled with heavy snorers wasn't one of Harry's main problems or concerns, but now it was rising on his list. And Crabbe had to be one of the worst offenders.

Stifling yet another yawn, Harry could only manage a nod as Malfoy took the seat across from him.

"You're up early," Malfoy commented as he surveyed that morning's breakfast.

"Didn't sleep well," Harry responded, watching as Malfoy selected a healthy portion of bacon.

"Crabbe or Goyle?" Malfoy asked, pouring himself some pumpkin juice.

"What if I said it was you?" Harry asked, stirring up his porridge.

"I'd say you were lying," Malfoy replied, smirking. Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Crabbe," he said quietly, taking a spoonful up to his mouth.

"Isn't it always," he heard Malfoy state. Harry didn't say anything. A couple of seats down, Crabbe and Goyle were busying themselves with their breakfast, and he didn't want to be overheard. Even if the two Slytherins weren't the brightest duo, they were certainly two of the burliest. That was reason enough, in Harry's mind, not to step on anyone's toes. And in Hogwarts, there were many toes and many more reasons.

Harry sighed tiredly to himself.

"Aren't you two brimming with excitement?" came Nott's mocking tone as he took a seat next to Malfoy. Harry furrowed his brows in confusion while Malfoy's upper lip curled in a small smirk.

"Of course. Today should prove to be very educational," Malfoy said, nodding as Blaise came behind Harry. Harry stiffened.

"Oh the wonders that await us," Blaise said flatly, reaching over Harry's shoulder for a biscuit roll. "Never, in all my years, has an adventure ever presented itself before me so..."-he looked to Nott curiously- "How did the rest go?" Nott smiled derisively.

"I believe it was, 'majestically'." Malfoy snorted with what Harry assumed was amusement, but he could never be sure with him.

"Oh yes. How silly of me to forget," Blaise said. Harry just looked into his bowl, not following any of the conversation. Malfoy must have sensed that because he rolled his eyes exasperatedly.

"You haven't read Lockhart's books yet, have you?" he asked Harry. He was looking at him as if Harry was a complete dunderhead.

"It's not like you have. You told me you haven't," Harry quipped back, agitated. Malfoy rolled his eyes again.

"Yes, but now we have his class today," Malfoy said. Harry didn't understand what that had to do with reading the man's books. "You've heard he's been giving everyone quizzes about them, haven't you?" Malfoy asked. Nott was staring at Harry critically just as Blaise sat down next to Harry to do the same. With so many accusatory stares, Harry shifted uncomfortably.

"How would I..." but he trailed off. Fantastic. Another strike against him. Another faulted step and mess up.

"While the man seems to be a complete incompetent, he's still giving out marks," Malfoy explained slowly as if Harry wouldn't be able to follow otherwise. "I still want to have the best marks even if the class is a joke." Harry bristled with indignation.

"Well sorry I don't have the same aspirations as you," Harry retorted heatedly. Malfoy was about to contort when Blaise intervened.

"It doesn't matter. I read the books but that doesn't mean I had it in me to actually memorize them. We'll just have to find out," the boy said. He motioned at Nott, and then both boys were standing.

"Well... see you two in class," Nott said. Harry returned the saying, but Malfoy remained taciturn. Harry had the suspicion that Malfoy,

while insightful and arrogant, was also a sulking brat. Harry didn't mind Malfoy's silence. That meant that Harry could relax and not feel as though he was being scrutinized with every little thing Malfoy said. He concentrated on eating.

After eight more spoonfuls of porridge, Harry scraped the remaining bit of his meal and downed his pumpkin juice. Then he cautiously peeked over his shoulder at the Gryffindor table. Alex and Edward hadn't arrived yet. Harry was certain that was all Edward's fault. He was such a difficult person to wake up.

"Late sleepers, aren't they?" Malfoy asked. Harry turned to face him.

"It's only Edward. If he could, I think he'd sleep for whole days," Harry said, smiling at the thought.

"I couldn't imagine doing that," Malfoy said in his usual precocious tone. Harry glanced at him wearily. "My father would never allow that," Malfoy added, biting into his kippers.

"I said if he could, not that he does," Harry explained, a little irritated. Malfoy just shrugged his shoulders. Harry wondered if Malfoy ever listened to other people besides himself and his father.

"You ready for Potions class today at least?" Malfoy asked him. Harry tensed completely missing the fact that Malfoy had managed to insult him.

"Yes. Why wouldn't I be?" he whipped back, feeling his face grow hot with resentment and anxiety.

"It just seems like you don't like it very much," Malfoy commented. Then he made a thoughtful expression. "Maybe we should practice during weekends, you know- just so you don't fall behind," he said while he neatly cleaned his plate and crossed his utensils. Harry just stared at him.

"But we can't do it this weekend," Malfoy added, looking up at Harry. Despite himself, and despite his offense, he asked,

"Why not?"

Malfoy smirked, and said, "It's just not a good time."

"What a shame," Harry said under his breath, and as he lifted his eyes to the ceiling with annoyance, hundreds of owls swooped in and circled above. They flew and dove, dropping packages, parcels, and letters into the laps of students. Harry spotted his own beautiful, snowy white owl instantly. She wasn't hard to miss in a swarm of brown and grey feathers.

She glided down gracefully and landed right in front of Harry. Holding out her leg, Harry took the tiny, rolled letter tied to it while thanking her with a bit of leftover toast. She nibbled on it while Harry pocketed the letter.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Malfoy asked him. Harry looked over Hedwig.

"There's no need. I know what it says." Hedwig cooed at him affectionately and Harry's attention focused back on the owl.

"Who is it from?" Malfoy asked.

"Mrs. Cole," Harry lied. He expected Malfoy to press on, but the Slytherin didn't ask any more. Malfoy became bored rather easily. That was fine with Harry. Malfoy's boredom equated to silence. Hedwig took one more bite of the toast and then lifted up to leave with the other owls.

"Time for class, then," Harry said. Then he and Malfoy made their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Harry felt the tiny, rolled letter in his pocket and wondered just what Mr. Cole had to say for the first of many letters still to come.

Oh Gods, Harry moaned as he took a seat next to Malfoy, Malfoy having insisted he do so.

He and the rest of the Slytherins- and Ravenclaws- had just clamored into the first class of the day, Defense against the Dark Arts, and Harry knew, from the moment he had stepped in, that it was going to be a joke.

The walls were plastered with murals, all winking and smiling, of Lockhart. The man himself came in seconds later and gave a rather

trite speech about some of his achievements, and Harry wondered what Dumbledore had been thinking when he had hired the man.

"Come now, class," he said in such an airy tone. "I know you're all just excited for my class, but we must quiet down." He was smiling so widely, Harry wondered if the man's lips would rip from it. "We have much to cover, as I'm sure you've all realized just from reading my books," and at that he gave a chuckle. Some of the girls giggled in response, and Harry shook his head. "Today's lesson is the threshold to the more riveting ones to come! And... it's one of the most important." He winked and with a swish of his flashy gold robes, he went to his desk to retrieve a great stack of papers.

"I wonder what this could be," Malfoy whispered to Harry. "Maybe a quiz?" Lockhart gave them each one of the papers, and to Harry's resentment, that's just what it was. Malfoy gave him the 'I told you so' expression, which irritated Harry more than the narcissistic quiz did.

"Alright class!" Lockhart exclaimed, spreading his heavily-lacy-and-gold arms wide. "Begin!" And he lowered his voice, giving a roguish smile, "and try not disappoint." Then he was at his desk scribbling over what Harry thought were many smiling pictures of the man. Was the professor serious?

Harry looked down the ridiculously long numbered quiz asking equally ridiculous questions. It was going to be such a long class, but Harry still thought that it was at least better than being in Potions. His stomach still knotted at the thought of Snape and that class, but Harry thought that he would manage better this time. He just hadn't known what to expect, but now he did. Snape hadn't said anything to him besides calling role, and Harry certainly wouldn't mess up another potion.

He even selfishly wondered if he'd be able to partner up with Edward or Alex. Although, Malfoy did seem to always sit by Harry or have Harry sit by him. Harry peeked over at Malfoy who was leaning over his quiz, his quill poised over it but not moving, his lip curled in disgust.

Malfoy was surprisingly... friendly. Well, maybe not friendly- his tone and mannerisms were all too drawling and arrogant- but he was making an effort to incorporate Harry into the Slytherin House. Harry

didn't know if that was exactly a good thing or not, but it did make it all a bit easier to manage- being in a new school and all, being in Slytherin, not being in Gryffindor with Alex and Edward...

"What are you putting for number 23?" Malfoy asked him quietly. Harry looked down at the question.

23. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement?

"Hmm... How about managing to be the most conceited person in the universe?" he muttered. Malfoy smirked at that and began to scribble something down; Harry doubted it was what he had said. Looking around the room, the only people that actually seemed to be taking the quiz seriously were the girls. Harry rolled his eyes and tried to not physically swear out loud when he read the question asking him what, in his opinion, were Lockhart's best features.

Oh, Merlin, he sighed exasperatedly, this is going to be such a long class. But he went to work, racking his brain for answers tailored and suited to a man whose ego knew no bounds. Harry figured a lot of flattery would at least get him a decent mark, no matter if the false adulation made him sick.

Harry found he rather liked Transfiguration. The spells were simple enough to grasp and just as simple to perform. It didn't hurt much that McGonagall knew exactly what she was talking about. Harry didn't think that even Malfoy could argue against that. The Slytherins all made it look as if they were there only because they were forced to- McGonagall was head of Gryffindor house after all- but Harry knew that they still respected her. Probably. Appearances were everything to a Slytherin, though, Harry was learning.

"It may sound easy- just chancing the color of an object, but I assure you that you are delusional if you think that it actually is. Watch closely," McGonagall commanded. She raised her wand and concentrating on the white bowl before her, she intoned, "Muto Viridis." The bowl, in an instant, was a forest green. "Make sure to envision the color clearly before speaking the spell."

After the lecture and demonstration, everyone stared at the own white bowls set before them. A lot of wand waving, spell yelling, and glass shattering or smoke explosions later, the class was one giant clamor. Harry had his own wand out but hadn't tried the spell out just

yet. He wanted to get it right on the first try. That may be a bit arrogant of him, but with all the blunders he had made so far, Harry wanted to get something right on his first go.

Malfoy's own bowl was rocking on his desk and kept shifting from white to pale yellow. Blaise had managed to get at least half of his a dark blue while Nott's was spitting out red clouds. Harry looked at his bowl, thought of a color, raised his wand, and with the correct movements, said the spell. It wasn't instantaneous like McGonagall's, but it fluidly turned from white to a dark green.

"Well done, Mr. Potter." Harry turned his head to see his professor standing behind him, nodding her head approvingly. "Try it again," she said. "Turn it back to its original color." Harry concentrated once more on his bowl.

"Muto Albus." This time, the transformation was much quicker, and Harry felt proud. McGonagall didn't say anything, but the pat on his shoulder said enough. When she was out of earshot, Malfoy leaned over to him.

"She could at least give you points for that," he said. Harry smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He was okay with just getting it right. Malfoy gave him a curious expression, but Harry didn't have enough time to figure it out before Malfoy turned back to his own work.

At the end of the class, only Harry, Malfoy, Blaise, Parkinson, and a few Ravenclaws were able to perform the spell successfully. Needless to say, the poor turnout resulted in homework: an essay on one step transfiguration.

"Pretty simple, wasn't it?" Malfoy asked Harry as they made their way to lunch. Harry thought that was rather funny considering it took Malfoy a million tries and four bowls to get it right, but Harry just smiled and agreed.

"I thought it was boring," Nott said from behind.

"That's only because you couldn't do it," Parkinson said as she and Millicent caught up to them.

"Maybe I just wasn't trying," he retorted.

"I know... It kind of defeats the whole purpose-not doing anything-, but maybe you'll learn that eventually," she said. Blaise and Millicent laughed, and Nott didn't or couldn't say anything in return. They entered the Great Hall, and Harry tried to detach himself from the group to go over to Alex and Edward who were waiting for him by the Gryffindor table when Malfoy grabbed his arm.

"You're eating with them? Again?" Malfoy asked, giving Edward and Alex a contemptuous look. Harry was at first so stunned to say anything, but then he yanked his arm out of Malfoy's hold while the others went over to the Slytherin table.

"Yes. They are my brothers," Harry said. Malfoy made an expression Harry didn't understand.

"You won't be able to for long," Malfoy told him.

"Why's that?" Harry asked. Malfoy gave him a pointed look and then turned on his heel to join the others at the Slytherin table. Harry wasn't going to waste time figuring out what that had all meant and so went to eat with Edward and Alex. So far, they had had all their meals outside, and Harry liked it that way.

"Long time, no see," Edward said as Harry came up to them.

"Were you late this morning?" Harry asked. Alex slapped his brother on the back.

"See? Even he noticed!" Alex exclaimed.

"Calm down, Alex," Edward said, scooting behind Harry for protection. "We were almost late. Not actually," he explained from behind Harry's shoulder.

"There isn't a whole lot of difference between almost and actually," Alex said, grabbing a plate and piling it with random food.

"But there is a difference. Hence, no detention!" Edward said, coming out from behind Harry.

"How close?" Harry asked, smiling and loading his own plate with lunch.

"As soon as we sat down, close," Edward said.

"You need to stop sleeping in so late," Harry laughed.

They made their way to their usual spot, lunch and all, and fell into a munching-silence. As Harry shifted over to grab the extra bread Alex didn't want, he felt the rolled letter scrape his pocket. He sat back and debated whether or not to read it yet.

"What's wrong? You don't want it?" Alex asked, holding out the food. Harry shook his head and reached out and took it.

"No... it's just... I got a letter," Harry said quietly. Both Edward and Alex stilled.

"You mean... you already wrote him?" Alex asked. Harry nodded.

"Did you read his reply yet?" Edward question. Harry shook his head.

"Do you want to now?" came Alex. Harry bit into the bread and after swallowing it, he reached into his pocket. He removed the black string and unrolled it.

"Should you read it out loud?" Alex asked, looking around cautiously. Edward shook his head and pursed his lips in a shushing fashion. Harry read over the letter to himself.

Dear Harry,

I'm a pleased to know that you are taking this all very seriously. I don't think that these exchanges will be intercepted as of now, but we must always be on our guard. I caution you to be more elusive in letters to come. I will know what you speak of, trust me. Tell Alex and Edward I look forward to hearing from them soon.

I hope you are adjusting well and are doing your best.

C.

Harry finished the letter and handed it to Edward who then passed to Alex once he'd read it.

"Well, that was a load of nothing," Alex said, giving the letter back to Harry. Harry pocketed it and picked his plate back up to finish eating. "Why bother sending a letter at all?"

"What could he say? Bravo Harry for being a good little spy?" Edward asked sarcastically.

"I don't know..." Alex said, looking off to the side, his cheeks slightly red.

"I appreciate the omission more than what was written," Edward said.

"What do you mean?" Alex asked. Harry smiled grimly.

"He didn't say anything about me being a Slytherin," Harry stated.

"Harry, you don't think he's doubting you?" Alex asked worriedly.

"No, it's just... it changes things, doesn't it?" Harry said.

"Father is very calculating," Edward agreed. " And I wonder how the order is taking it." Alex looked back and forth between Harry and Edward.

"That's pointless. There's nothing to be done about that," Alex said. Harry looked at him guiltily. "I don't mean that in a bad way!" Alex clarified. His cheeks reddened again, and he looked crestfallen. Harry knew how he meant it, but it didn't change the fact that he still felt like he was in the wrong for it.

"I like the part of about trying your best, too," Edward said, sipping his water. Harry looked up and grinned.

"Not very subtle," he agreed. Mr. Cole had made it very clear that he wanted Harry (as well as Edward and Alex) to do all that they could to gather information. It had nothing to do with Hogwarts or studies.

"Changing the subject," Edward said, "what was all that about with Malfoy?" Alex whipped his head in Harry's direction, and his look made Harry feel guilty again though he didn't know why.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why'd he hold you back?" Edward asked.

"He asked if I was eating with you guys." Edward grinned mischievously.

"Yeah, I bet he doesn't like it that much," he said.

"Why would he care? We're Harry's brothers," Alex said defiantly. Harry felt his cheeks grow warm. It wasn't as though he didn't see himself as part of Edward and Alex's family, he just sometimes wondered if he had the right to, and hearing one of them declare it always made Harry happy.

"Sure, but that doesn't mean anything to Malfoy," Edward said, flicking his brother's shoulder. "Harry's Slytherin. To Malfoy, that's more important than ties to a Gryffindor, no matter if the tie is familial." Alex shook his head in disagreement.

"Well, it's not," he declared. Harry squirmed in embarrassment, shifting what food that remained on his plate in no particular pattern.

"I said 'to Malfoy' it does," Edward huffed.

"Well, it doesn't," Alex said again. Edward rolled his eyes while Harry remained silent and scrambled his food around, feeling awkward but slightly elated.

"Anyway... I just can't wait for the weekend," Edward said, lying back on the ground and closing his eyes.

"You and everyone else," Alex said, stacking all the plates, even Harry's.

"Yeah... with good reason," he punctuated, looking at his brother with one opened eye. After another class of Potions, Harry knew he'd be more than ready for the weekend.

"Come on Harry. This is a simple potion," Malfoy was saying as he diced the eglantine. Harry had enough within him to glare at Malfoy. Yes, he knew that the potion was simple. That doesn't mean his frayed nerves kept it simple. Harry really thought he'd be able to do better, but every time Snape walked by, his anxiety shot up like bile from the pit of his stomach. Malfoy had to stop him two times already from ruining the potion.

"This is just a review potion. We made this last year. Didn't you have a potions class at Alseana?" Malfoy asked, irritated.

"Yes," Harry hissed at him, glancing at Snape cautiously, but he was busy examining Blaise and Nott's potion. Malfoy looked at him dubiously. Harry let out a huff and went to crushing the beetles. This particular potion called for live beetles, and Harry wasn't particularly enjoying taking out the hostage bugs and pulverizing them. But it was the only thing Malfoy was letting him do, even if he was hovering over Harry every minute making sure the beetles were mere smudges on the dicing board.

"Mr. Weasley," Snape suddenly quipped. Harry jumped and several of the beetles he had been keeping captive under hand went scuttling all over the table. "Can you tell me how you got to this poor, inexcusable state?" the glowering professor asked of the redhead.

"What are you doing?" Malfoy hissed at Harry as Harry ducked under the table to catch the fleeing potion ingredients.

"Well, Mr. Weasley?" Snape coolly repeated.

"I... um," and Harry heard Ron gulp, "I don't quite know—Sir," he said slowly.

"Mr. Potter!" Snape called suddenly, whipping around. Harry jolted and knocked his head against the bottom of the table.

"Sir—yes! I was—beetles..." Harry stammered on helplessly, holding the recaptured bugs within his hands with a viselike grip. Malfoy stared at him incomprehensively while Snape surveyed him with his black, emotionless eyes. Harry looked away and stared at the beetle guts oozing out of his hands.

"I don't suppose you're conducting the potion experiment under your desk?" Snape asked evenly. Harry swallowed hard as several muted laughs sounded in the class. Past Snape's shoulder, Alex and Edward were watching on. Alex looked tense and worried, as if he was going to march down and put himself in between harm and Harry. Edward's expression was inscrutable.

"No, I just dropped something," Harry answered quietly, wanting nothing more than to wipe the guts off his hands and leave. For a minute, there was no noise. Snape said nothing, no one moved, no one coughed or sneezed, not even the beetles, forgotten in that moment, scurried. That minute was one of the longest moments of Harry's life. Not wanting to withstand it any longer, he was about to open his mouth and apologize when Snape, again, snapped around.

"Mr. Weasley? Do you think it was the fact that you didn't mince the woodbine as finely as instructed, or was it that you forgot to add the eglantine precisely after the wormwood? Or was it your complete and utter disregard of letting the hawkweed seep in boiling water for exactly three minutes?" Snape interrogated. Weasley, who must have thought he had been let off the hook when Snape had called on Harry, stood with his mouth agape. Then, every other second, he would glance at the girl with bushy brown hair sitting in front of him imploringly.

"I suppose you wouldn't know," Snape said coldly, walking over to Weasley and Longbottom's potion. "Zero marks for you today, Mr. Weasley," Snape said, clearing away the spoiled potion. "And zero marks for you, Longbottom, for not having enough sense to correct it." With that, the man returned to his desk and sat down sifting through papers.

Slowly, class recommenced. Harry scraped the beetles off his hand and apologized to Malfoy for the ruin ingredients. Malfoy didn't say anything, for which Harry was grateful. Instead, he burrowed into his potion kit and pulled out a jar of his own beetles. Tapping out a few, Malfoy swiftly crushed them and, along with Harry's, added them to the sizzling cauldron.

Harry watched as Weasley plopped down in his seat heavily, looking pale and sick, while Longbottom stared into the empty cauldron. The girl with bushy hair kept turning around and saying things that made Weasley nod a couple of times frantically, and Harry was certain he

was mouthing the words, "...yeah, sure. It'll be alright. Sure, sure, sure..."

"It's done," Malfoy said.

"Oh, right. Good," Harry replied, turning back to the now pale orange potion. Wordlessly, Malfoy ladled some of the potion into a kind of flask, corked it, and went up to Snape's desk to turn it in. Snape acknowledged him with a curt nod, and Malfoy returned to his seat, smirking.

"We just received the highest marks for the potion," Malfoy whispered to him as he took his seat. Harry furrowed his brows.

"How would you know that?" he asked. Malfoy turned to him.

"First off, I made it," Malfoy said snobbishly, which made Harry a little annoyed (though he couldn't say anything because it was true), "and secondly, he said so."

"Who?" Harry asked naively.

"Professor Snape," Malfoy said exasperatedly. "Who else?" he added as he began to clean up their mess. Harry wanted to ask how Malfoy could be certain because Snape didn't seem to be someone to give another a head's up... at all, but he didn't want to seem like a bigger idiot than he must already appear.

Then class was over, and Harry, ready for this part of class, was packed and out the door. He stalled to let Edward and Alex catch up to him, but Malfoy did instead.

"What was all that about?" he asked, walking up to Harry.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, searching over Malfoy's shoulder for Alex and Edward.

"What do you mean what do I mean?" Malfoy asked, clearly irritated. "And what are you looking at?" he asked glancing behind him.

"Oh, I'm waiting for Edward and Alex," Harry said. He didn't see them, but perhaps they were stalled. Malfoy looked at him blankly,

and then without warning, grabbed Harry's arm and yanked him forward and dragged him along the corridor.

"Whoah—wha... What are you doing?" Harry asked, stunned.

"I'm not going to be late for class," Malfoy said simply.

"Yeah, alright, but why does that involve me?" Harry asked as he let himself still get dragged along.

"You're in my house, you're a Slytherin, too," Malfoy said. Harry was taken aback. If he didn't know better, he would have almost—almost thought that Malfoy had said something... kind of nice. And being so stunned, Harry didn't resist or say anything more as he was dragged along behind Malfoy to their next class.

"Why do we have to do this so early?" Harry moaned as he padded behind Edward.

"Oh come on! Don't give me that! You need this," he said, walking at such a brusque pace that Harry was having trouble keeping up with him.

"But why so early?" he asked again. The grass beneath his feet was moist with morning dew, and the sky was still a rosy pink. Harry stifled a yawn and gripped his broom tighter. He tripped on a mound of grass and silently cursed Edward for then laughing at him and for walking ridiculously fast. He wasn't awake enough for this; Crabbe had been snoring too loudly again, and for the few moments Harry did fall asleep, his dreams were suspiciously filled with roaring lions or thunderous claps. All in all, Harry was still very sleepy.

Crossing the Hogwarts land, they finally made their way onto the Quidditch field. Harry was only thankful no one else was there. He could let loose, as was Edward's intentions. Then again, who besides Edward and he, apparently, were mad enough to wake before the sun completely was? On a weekend?

"AH! It smells so good out here!" Edward exclaimed as he inhaled and exhaled repeatedly, so much so that Harry wandered if his friend would eventually pass out from it. Perhaps Harry could then catch a few more hours of sleep...

"I said are you ready?" Edward asked, waving his hand in front of Harry, making Harry screw up his eyes to focus on the hand.

"Yes," Harry yawned, stretching which caused him to drop his broom. Edward stared at him unconvinced. "Where's Alex?" Harry asked, reaching down for his broom while simultaneously stretching out his back.

"In the library," Edward said disgustedly.

"Why?" Harry asked. He didn't even think the library was opened to students so early.

"Because he wants to read up on a few things," Edward said elusively. Harry was really too tired to try and work that out, so he let it drop until he was cognizant enough to really consider it.

"So...?" Harry trailed.

"Right!" Edward grinned, and throwing a leg over his broom, he leaned down close to the handle, his nose almost touching the wood, and said, "See ya." With that, he shot up into the air, swirling air and dirt around Harry as he lifted higher and higher into the sky. Harry removed his glasses and wiped off the dirt that settled on the lenses.

"Git," and mirroring Edward, he mounted his broom and kicked off. The wind whipped at his face as he rose upwards at speeds he was too tired to fathom. Then he shifted his weight on his broom and ricocheted left. Ripping through the air as he was, and with the chilly air lashing back at him, it didn't take long for Harry to fully wake up.

"WHOOOOOO!" came a sonorous shout below him. Edward was racing with Harry below and pulling ahead. Harry wouldn't allow that. He leaned down close to the broom and slightly forward, and he felt the broom gain in speed. He pulled himself in close—pulled his arms into his sides, his legs upwards, his knees together— and felt himself pick up even more speed. In the midst of trying to out-race Edward, Harry realized how much he had missed this.

He looked down beneath him and saw no head or hair of Edward. He slowed down, and pulled his broom to turn around. Edward was a hovering speck in the middle of the Quidditch field, and Harry was... Harry turned his head and found Hogwarts was right beneath him.

When did that happen? he thought flying back towards Edward. "Guess I won?" he grinned as he halted in front of Edward.

"You pulled waaay ahead of me a long time ago," Edward said as he rested on his broom sullenly. "Then the race became how long will it take Harry to notice." He looked up and grinned. "I have to say, mate, you out did yourself. Congratulations." Harry scratched the bottom of his nose.

"I really couldn't have done it without you," he said.

"Is that right?" Edward said, trying to feign incredulity but failing by smiling. "Well... I don't even know what to say," he stammered, wiping away invisible tears from his eyes. "Suppose I'll just... have to... show you up!" And with that, he threw a snitch into the air with such force it went soaring, it looked, straight towards Hogwarts. Harry didn't have enough time to debate where Edward had even got the snitch from before he was reflexively speeding off behind Edward.

He caught up easily enough, and Edward glanced behind his shoulder and threw Harry a 'you can't be serious?' look before refocusing on the snitch ahead. But in that instant that Edward had looked away, the snitch had decided to peel off to the right. Anticipating it, Harry had no problem changing direction. It took Edward another two seconds to realize he was chasing nothing and no one was chasing him. Then he was right behind Harry.

The snitch was erratic, moving left then right, up then down, making wide circles or daring small ones that made Harry think he had almost caught it, but it was what Harry loved most about the game Quidditch. The thought of being faster than the small, winged device and out maneuvering it—Harry always swore he thought snitches were sentient—was a thrill Harry really enjoyed.

From out of nowhere, Edward was suddenly right against him and holding out his arm for the golden ball that was mere inches away.

"I'm afraid this is where I beat you," Edward said confidently as his fingers were almost upon the snitch. Harry stayed his hand. At any second the snitch would—

And just as Edward's fingers grazed the orb, the snitch shot downwards. Harry dived almost simultaneously, and it wasn't but six seconds later that he held the snitch within his grasps, its feathery wings fluttering helplessly.

He ambled towards Edward smirking triumphantly.

"I think I missed the moment of you beating me," he said, laughing.

"Yeah, yeah, Harry. No one likes a showoff," Edward muttered. Harry grinned and Edward, finally conceding, ruffled Harry's hair. "I have taught you well," he said proudly. Harry rolled his eyes.

Descending back towards ground, there was something on the field that hadn't been there an hour ago. In fact, there were a lot more. Reaching the ground, Harry climbed off his broom just as an older Slytherin walked towards him.

"Tryouts weren't until now, but I have to say- that was some display," the older boy said, and Harry recognized him as Marcus Flint, a fifth year and the Slytherin Quidditch team captain. "We may just have a spot for you," he said evenly.

"What?" Harry asked. Then Harry recognized Malfoy and Nott amongst the group, all of whom were wearing green and black Quidditch robes, and had their brooms, and the captain had just mentioned 'tryouts' and... "Oh no! I was just practicing with Edward," Harry explain as he turned around to point out Edward, but Edward wasn't there. No, he was far on the other side of the field inching slowly away.

Malfoy stepped forward and wasn't looking too happy.

"I didn't know you liked to fly," he said darkly, and Harry had the impression he was under an interrogation.

"You never asked," Harry said simply.

"You never mentioned it either," Malfoy responded, stepping forward.

"I didn't know I should have," Harry replied, backing away.

"Are you going for the seeker position?" he pressed on. At this, he saw Nott bristle with attentiveness.

"No! I just told Flint that I was—" Harry tried to explain.

"Because that's the spot I'm getting," Malfoy said with such finality that it irked Harry.

"Did Flint tell you that?" Harry asked.

"It's a given," Malfoy calmly stated.

"Then why are you out here for tryouts if it's a given?" Harry retorted. Flint was watching them, his head turning this way and back, and Harry suspected this was amusing to him. However, Harry was a little too irate to care.

"It's for formality's sake," Malfoy shot back, arrogantly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Last I checked, there weren't too many formalities when it came to Quidditch," Harry said.

"There are in Slytherin," Malfoy replied evenly. Harry was about to argue more when there was someone very unexpected on the field. In black robes as usual, he walked towards the group with an eerie glide that reminded Harry of vampires. It didn't make him feel very good, and being already angry, Snape suddenly appearing was stomach-turning, at best.

Harry tried to discreetly wiggle his way into the back behind the older and taller students, but he only got as far as behind Malfoy before Snape was there.

"Follow me," Snape said simply, and as much as Harry wished he had imagined it, there was no mistaking Snape looking directly at him. Malfoy, though he had been just as irritated as Harry just a second ago, glanced at him curiously.

Snape was surprisingly quick, and Harry was almost at a jog keeping up with him. Several times, in his nervousness, the broom would either slip completely out of his hand and he would have to pick it up and run to catch up with Snape, or worse, it would slip only

a little, tripping Harry so that he fell several times. Snape looked none too happy at having to be delayed while Harry picked himself up, and that only increased Harry's anxiety.

As he trudged behind the very Death Eater he was spying on, he couldn't help but think that whatever this was, it wasn't good.

A/N: Thank you! See ya next time!

Chapter Eight: What Looms in the Forest?

What had he been thinking? It was all over now; Mr. Cole will wonder what happened to Harry when the letters stop coming, and what he'll find is nothing. Snape would surely obliterate Harry off the face of the earth. Who did Harry think he was going up against an adversary like Severus Snape?

Harry swallowed convulsively several times. He was now trying not to stumble over his broom as he and Snape made their way down to the dungeons. Harry had the frightening thought of not being heard down in the dungeons, so that meant no one would come for him any time soon. Just as Harry had dreadfully thought, Snape lead him into his very office.

Harry stepped in only because Snape loomed right behind him, blocking the only means of freedom and escape. Once fully in the room, Snape shut the door and, as Harry suspected, probably even locked it. The room was just as dark as the professor's classroom with even more and odder things kept in jars along the walls. There was a desk, a chair, a couch, and a door, and a lot of books—books that Harry knew were filled with ghastly ways to dismember a person, or turn people into horrific things, or—

"Sit," Snape instructed. Reflexively, Harry sat on the floor, and realizing his stupid blunder, scrambled up and chose the chair. Snape strode over to his desk, sat down, and, lacing his fingers before his face, he proceeded to stare at Harry. Harry had always been somewhat shy and direct eye contact with people was sometimes unnerving, but that was nothing in comparison to having a former Death Eater stare you down. Harry gulped and looked away, a headache starting to formulate.

Even in this moment, dangerous as it was, Harry wished that he would not, at least, have some kind of magical explosion. Headaches were generally a forewarning to them, and stress was the catalyst. This could all get very ugly, very fast.

"As you may know, or not, I pride myself on being Head of a house that strives for diligence if not perfection," Snape said. It wasn't something Harry had been expecting, and he looked up startled. There was a flicker of an expression on Snape's face, a twitch in the

brow, a look in the eye, but it was gone before Harry could truly decipher it.

"While I think its absolutely appalling that you have not made one decent potion, I have to concede to let you on the team," Snape said. Though Snape hadn't said it particularly fast, Harry wasn't sure he heard right. Snape must have realized this, so he said more slowly, "Do you understand me?"

"I... I don't, sir," Harry stuttered. Snape looked vexed, but he sighed.

"I saw you flying with Mr. Cole and believe you are what the team needs," Snape said. Harry blanked again, then blinked, and repeating the words over and over again in his mind, he came to the conclusions that... Snape was not going to eradicate Harry's existence in that moment. Instead, the Death Eater was offering him a spot on the Slytherin Quidditch team.

"Um, wouldn't that—shouldn't that be up to Flint, sir?" Harry asked nervously, thinking that this could be a trap instead... somehow.

"Do you question my judgment?" Snape coldly asked.

"No, sir! No, I just... will it be alright with Flint and the others?" Harry asked, not really understanding what he was even saying.

"They will find I make sound decisions and will not question them, if that is, again, what you are asking," Snape snapped back. Harry, at that point, thought it best just to keep his mouth shut. Nothing he was saying was obviously the right thing. "Does this mean you accept?" Snape asked. Harry thought about the consequences of just saying no, and decided he didn't want to know. He nodded his head.

"Good. However," Snape began. Of course. There was always an 'however.' "I hold my house up to the highest of standards. If you are to be on the team, you will excel in academics, and where you are subpar, you will work that much harder. Do I make myself clear?" Snape asked in a dangerous hiss. Harry nodded, the motion almost convulsive. "That is all, then."

Harry didn't have to be told twice. He bowed his head and was outside the door before anyone could say 'anathema.' He didn't even

relax until he was far from the office, not until he was outside of the Hogwarts castle itself. But he didn't really relax; he just counted his lucky stars that he was still around.

Well, Harry thought as he leaned up against a tree overlooking the lake, that had been unexpected. He slouched down unto the grass and closed his eyes. His head bombinated with the vagary of that morning. Harry mulled over all the possibilities that the exchange between him and Snape had meant. One, was that this was some elaborate trap where Harry might just meet his doom while flying after a snitch. How many accidents and deaths were related to Quidditch after all? It would be a perfect disguise for Snape. Then again, even to Harry, that sounded absurd.

The other possibility was that Snape was just a shrewd individual and really meant for Harry to be on the team to further the prospects of winning the House Cup, a trophy all teachers seemed to have their eye on. Snape was apparently no exception.

But that idea didn't really comfort Harry at all. In fact, it bemused him to think of a renowned Death Eater as just another teacher competing for House glory. Thinking of Snape in the bleachers cheering Harry on for the capture of a snitch made his head spin.

Then again, maybe that's what Snape wanted Harry to think. Snape was obviously someone who could adapt and blend in with his surroundings. It's what makes a spy so efficient and lethal. No one was the wiser to their true identity, and with Snape playing professor, what better way to further that disguise than to vie for a trophy alongside every other teacher?

Then that just made the idea of obliterate-Harry-by-Quidditch plausible again, furthering the headache pounding within his skull.

"You don't look very happy," someone said. Harry looked blearily up at a wind-swept Malfoy. The blond that was normally sleeked back was tousled and all over the place, and his cheeks were flushed, and he was... smiling?

"Oh, no. I'm just tired," Harry said, slumping back against the tree.

"What did Professor Snape want?" Malfoy asked sitting next to Harry. Harry looked at him curiously. Wasn't Malfoy mad at him for

something? "Are you in trouble?" Malfoy asked when Harry didn't respond.

"No," Harry answered quickly. "Why would I be in trouble?" Then it was Malfoy's turn to stare at him perplexedly. Harry shut his mouth and went to staring at the lake. It was taking much longer for his headache to dissipate than normally did.

"No reason, I guess," Malfoy said, running his hands over the top of his head to smooth down his hair.

You guess? Harry repeated annoyed. "Then why'd you ask?"

"Because I can't think of any other reason why he would ask for you," Malfoy said evenly, his hair back in its place. Harry looked at him.

"He wanted to tell me that he thinks I should be seeker on the team," Harry said heatedly, his intent making Malfoy angry.

"Making you what?" Malfoy asked. Harry smiled, the expression unfriendly.

"I said he wanted to make me seeker," Harry repeated.

"And what did you tell him?" Malfoy asked, his usual blank façade morphing into childish anger.

"I said yes, of course."

"Of course you would," was Malfoy's response after a moment of silence. Then with that, he stood up and left. Harry glared at Malfoy's retreating form, cursing him for just making his headache worse. Then Harry bumped his head against the tree in frustration.

It wasn't as if Harry had particularly wanted to be on the team. If he did, he would want to play for Gryffindor, but like hell that would happen. And like Harry could tell him the real reason why he had said yes. Harry banged his up against the tree again.

"You alrigh' there 'arry?" Opening his eyes, he saw Hagrid bending down, staring at Harry worriedly.

"Hullo, Hagrid," Harry said, leaning up and smiling, happy to see a kinder face than he had in the last hour.

"Might not want ter do that," Hagrid said as he repositioned several large sacs over his expansive shoulders.

"Why?" Harry asked, though he could think of a few reasons himself why bashing his head against a tree wasn't the brightest of ideas.

"Because I'll be needin' ya with yer wits about ye," Hagrid said vaguely, smiling at him widely. "Follow me." He turned and left in the direction of the forbidden forest. Harry stood up and followed him unquestioningly. Sure enough, to the Forbidden forest was exactly where they were headed.

"Sir?" Harry began to voice, as he fell behind a little, noting that Hagrid had a huge crossbow tied across his back.

"Call me Hagrid," the giant said, his massive steps hardly making a sound as they crossed over the beginning brambles of the woods.

"Okay, Hagrid?" Harry asked.

"Yes?" he answered as he continued on, leading Harry further and further into the thickening trees.

"Should we be in here?" He knew it was probably a little too late to voice this concern. He had followed Hagrid into the place, after all, but that still didn't make it a brilliant idea.

"Don't worry, 'arry! Would I bring you somewhere you shouldn' be?" Hagrid said, his booming laugh odd in the overpowering silence. If that were true, Harry wondered what the use of the crossbow was for then. Hagrid must have sensed Harry's unease. His face screwed up into concern, and he stopped walking and looked down at Harry. "Do ye want ter go back?" he asked. His troubled eyes made Harry feel guilty, so he put on a bravado to counter it.

"No, no!" he replied, smiling tightly. "I'm fine. Really!" It wasn't as though he didn't trust Hagrid. He just didn't trust the creepy forest. This one was proving to be even more daunting and unwelcoming than the one lurking behind the Coles' mansion. Harry wondered then if he had an unexplainable aversion to vast clusters of trees.

"Good! 'cause there's somethin' I want ter show ye," Hagrid smiled, and Harry smiled back in turn. When Harry thought about it, he was certain Hagrid could take on a few foes from the forest. That's what he told himself, at least. So they continued on in the ever darkening forest, making so many erratic turns that Harry soon forgot what direction they had even entered in from. At least Hagrid seemed to know where he was going.

Just when it became so dark in the forest that Harry wondered if it had taken them all day to venture through it, Hagrid stopped. Harry collided into the back of him, oblivious, and fell back. Hagrid helped him up, apologizing, then he held a finger up to his mouth to shush both himself and Harry. Harry didn't know if that was a good sign or not and kept quiet out of fear alone. Hagrid cupped a hand over Harry's shoulder and crouched down low, and with the weight on his shoulder, Harry fell over again. He scrambled onto his hands and knees when he suddenly heard a cracking of branches. He checked underneath him to see if he had been the culprit, and then to Hagrid, but when the cracking sounded again, he knew it was something else walking about.

His nerves shot up and his heart hammered. He looked up to Hagrid to ask if maybe they should do something along the lines of running or hiding, but Hagrid was peering out into the thickening eagerly, his crossbow untouched. Harry shut his mouth and looked on. Another snap echoed, and then another, then there was silence. Slowly, carefully, Hagrid removed the sacs from his shoulders and laid them down on the ground. Harry felt his heart dropped onto the ground along with them.

A light appeared, pale and lambent, and with the loudening of the cracks, the light grew brighter.

Then out of the brushes stepped a magnificent sight—a stallion unicorn, his alicorn aglow and his silver mane and coat gleaming softly. Harry held his breath. Never had he ever seen such a creature; never did he think he would either. The beast emitted an eldritch radiance that alighted the small clearing he and Hagrid had entered.

The stallion walked forward and stopped when it caught sight of Hagrid and Harry crouching low to the ground. It raised its nuzzle,

turned its head to fix its eye upon the two, and snorted. Sensing no apparent danger, it came even closer.

"Hullo there, boy," Hagrid greeted softly. Harry watched unblinkingly, mouth agape, as the stallion reared its head and trotted right over to Hagrid. It stopped just short of the giant then lowered its head to sniff at the ground. Finding the bags, he nudged it with his nose.

"Ha ha! Oh look! Thinks they're for 'im. Bless 'im!" Hagrid laughed, elbowing Harry painfully into the side, about popping all the air out of him. The unicorn snorted again and pawed at the ground impatiently. "Alright, alright! You silly brute," Hagrid chuckled as he opened one of the bags and loads of red apples came tumbling out. The stallion didn't even wait another second before it began eating the first apple that rolled to its hooves. While it feasted, Hagrid stood and cautiously walked over to the unicorn. He studied it all over, circling it, bending down to look at the legs, and frowning now and then.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked breathlessly, still in awe.

"Not too sure," Hagrid grumbled. He stood and staring at Harry helplessly, he scratched at his wild beard. "Found some unicorn blood not too long ago—been tryin' to see if any of 'em are hurt," Hagrid said.

"What's doing it?" Harry asked, tearing his eyes away from the majestic animal for the first time.

"Hard ter say... Sometimes they just get into trouble. The forest is big after all and home to more than the world's fair share of dark creatures," Hagrid said as he watched the animal eat without care. "Then worse, there're always a wizard or two who are crazy enough to try and do 'em harm," Hagrid added ominously.

"Why?" Harry asked, appalled that anyone who ever even think of harming something so beautiful. Hagrid rubbed at his beard and looked at Harry sadly.

"They're valuable ter some, ya see. From their manes to their tails to their horns. 'specially their horns." Harry couldn't say that he was truly ignorant of the matter. Mr. Cole had told him once of how he and a few of his colleagues had imprisoned a wizard after they had found a room dedicated to the severed alicorns of the animals. But

Harry didn't like to think of that and staring at such a sight, he found it even harder to imagine someone depraved enough to gaze upon such a beast too and injure it.

"It's illegal, of course," Hagrid said, "but there still those that'll try." Harry felt a little sick. The stallion finished it's fourth apple and happily moved forward to devour another. Even with the luminous glow of the beast, Harry felt an uneasiness creep into him. The forest, what little that was visible beyond the edges of the unicorn's light, seemed much darker then.

"But he's okay right?" Harry asked worriedly. Hagrid stepped beside Harry and smiled.

"Course he is. Just brought him the greatest meal, I did. 'Course now I won't be needin' these," Hagrid said bending down to retrieve the unopened sac.

"What's that for?" Harry asked.

"This was for just in case one of 'em wasn't alright," Hagrid said evenly. Harry felt a shiver run up his spine. "Ye can feed 'im ye know," Hagrid said suddenly, picking up an apple and putting it into Harry's hand.

"Are you sure?" Harry watched the unicorn and didn't think it was such a good idea. Besides, weren't only girls able to touch them? Harry explained this and after he did, he felt his cheeks burn because Hagrid started laughing. The thunderous sound seemed to rattle the branches, and it made Harry jerk his head about in alarm, but the unicorn remained unfazed.

"That's just an ol' bard's tale," Hagrid chuckled. "Really, on'y innocent of heart are supposed ter be able to get near 'im," Hagrid explained, "but yer a kid! That's good enough, righ'?" He continued to chortle as he pushed Harry forward. That didn't make Harry feel any more confident. Quite the opposite, in fact. Innocent children didn't go skulking around a castle spying on their professors. Nor did they have magical—

No. He mustered all the conviction he had in him at the moment and was saddened to find it so lacking. Hagrid gave one more nudge which sent Harry stumbling forward. He caught himself just at the

hooves of the unicorn. Harry looked up at it cautiously before he dared to edge back. The beast looked right into his eyes, and Harry saw his own distorted reflection within the ethereally pale blue eyes of the creature. It was unsettling.

Something surged up from his belly, a kind of hunger that made Harry want to reach out and touch the animal—told him that he was so close to such mystical, arcane, and unobtainable power. Harry reached out, his fingers trembling. The unicorn never wavered, staring, instead, deep into and within Harry's eyes. Harry stayed his hand, hovering just above the unicorn's forelock.

There was a pulsing, deep and strong. It reverberated off the creature, echoed within the distance between it and Harry's hand, and Harry felt it. Harry closed his eyes, and the hunger in his belly grew. The surging power emitting off of the beast drummed inside Harry's head. It was maddening.

Harry felt himself sway, the ground unsteady beneath such might—underneath the power he was feeling. The hunger rumbled louder and louder until Harry could no longer withstand it. He wanted to know what such power felt like, too.

Just as his hand was almost upon the nuzzle of the unicorn, the beast reared and giving such a tremendous bellow, kicked out towards Harry. Hagrid pulled him back just before the hooves collided into Harry's stomach, and Harry went sprawling onto the ground, breathing hard and fitfully.

"Alrigh' there, Harry?" Hagrid asked pulling Harry up to his feet. His head was fuzzy, and he felt shaky. The forest slowly spun, stopped, shifted back, and pivoted again. "Harry?"

"The unicorn!" Harry shouted, latching onto Hagrid's arm. "Is he alright? Did I scare him? Did I do something?" Harry asked quickly, his head still whirling.

"No, no. He's fine. I guess we jus' strained our luck too far," Hagrid replied, keeping Harry standing. Harry bowed his head and watched as the ground bit by bit steadied.

"I scared him," Harry affirmed guiltily. What had just happened, Harry didn't understand, but he knew, or felt, enough to see that he

had crossed some kind of boundary. One which made the unicorn retaliate against him.

"Oh, they're fickle creatures. Wouldn't let it bother ye much, 'arry. It's just instinct fer 'em. That's all," Hagrid said encouragingly. "I should be getting' ye back now anyway," Hagrid said after Harry said nothing. Hagrid placed the sacs, one empty and one unused, back over unto his shoulders. Harry followed despondently. He noticed that the unicorn was nowhere in sight. Not even it's luminosity was visible. Harry didn't know why or how, but he did understand, whether or not Hagrid believed it, that he had frightened the beast.

That's quite a feat was what Harry bitterly thought as he trudged behind Hagrid. Harry would catch that every now and then Hagrid would stop to allow Harry to catch up, or that he would turn his head to watch Harry. To Harry, that just meant that he had surely done something wrong.

Harry was in such a stupor that he hadn't realized the open, bright sky overhead, nor the giant boarhound slobbering and running up to meet him. It wasn't until Harry was on his back with slobber all over his face that he realized they were out of the forest.

"Fang! Fang! Get off of him, you brute," Hagrid said as he pulled the tail-wagging dog off of Harry.

"What is that?" Harry asked dazedly, wiping the drool off of his face.

"He's my dog, Fang. Fang, say hullo!" With that the dog bounded over and unto Harry again, licking every inch of his face. Despite himself, Harry began laughing. The dog was almost as massive as its owner and just as kind it seemed. "No, no, you silly animal! Fang! Heel!" Surprisingly, the dog backed off and sat, staring up at his master expectantly.

"Well, Fang's glad ter meet ya!" Hagrid said as he ushered Harry into a small hut on the outskirts of the forest. Harry knew the hut belonged to the key-keeper, it was just odd to picture such a giant of a man living in such a tiny home. But when Harry stepped in, he was surprised at how comfortable it felt.

It was a single, circular room. Along one stretch of wall was the kitchen with a modest stove and sink and many copper pots and

pans dangling above. Next to that were a couple of chairs and a small couch, barely big enough for Hagrid it seemed. In the center was a table where mugs and bowls were set. Across from that and on the other side of the kitchen, hung a drape where Harry glimpsed the edge of a massive bed.

"Well, get in and take a seat," Hagrid beamed. Harry chose a comfortable looking green chair and sunk right into it. Behind him, Hagrid bustled around in the kitchen. Harry turned around to tell Hagrid not to go to any sort of trouble on his sake, but Hagrid, donning an apron, had already made the tea and brought biscuits as well. The tea seemed good enough, piping hot, but after a couple of sips, it didn't burn his tongue so much. The biscuits, unfortunately, Harry left of the plate after he swore he broke a tooth from biting into one. That biscuit he snuck to Fang who chewed and chewed on it with no such better luck it seemed.

"How do ye like the school so far?" Hagrid asked innocently. Harry felt his stomach churn.

"Oh, its brilliant," he said enthusiastically, though he felt otherwise. He stirred his tea around and watched it swirl.

"Dumbledore's brilliant. No one better ter run such a school, is what I've always said," Hagrid boasted proudly. "Great man, that Dumbledore. Hired me when no one else would."

"Why's that?" Harry asked, glad for a distraction. Fang stopped in front of Harry and dropped his head in his lap. Hagrid chocked on his tea, and dabbed at his beard with the bottom of his apron.

"Eh, well, I can't do magic, strictly speakin'. An' not much use for an oaf like me when yeh can't do magic," Hagrid said ruefully.

"Oh," Harry sighed, scratching Fang behind the ears. Harry had heard of squibs, he just hadn't ever met one. Must be irritating living in a wizarding world and not being able to do magic. Harry suddenly felt bad for asking.

"No, no!" Hagrid suddenly exclaimed. "I can do magic—just not supposed to," Hagrid added, looking frazzled and embarrassed.

"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" Harry asked.

"Oh—I was at Hogwarts meself but I—er—got expelled, ter be honest. Happened in me third year—they snapped me wand in half an' everything," Hagrid said staring at a basin filled with canes, the crossbow, and an unusually bright, and tatty, pink umbrella. "But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man..." Hagrid said, wiping the corners of his eyes.

"But why were you expelled?" Harry asked. He couldn't imagine Hagrid doing anything that would have warranted such an extreme punishment.

"Gallopin' Gargoyles!" Hagrid bellowed, leaping to his feet with a thunderous boom, spilling tea all down the front of him. "Forgot I was supposed to meet with Professor Sprout! Sorry, Harry! Gotta go an' all," he said as he bustled about his cabin, grabbing tiny bags and stuffing them in his pockets. He went by the door, opened it, and looked to Harry apologetically. "Stop by agin fer tea anytime." Harry got the message.

"I'd like that very much," Harry said as he hopped out of the chair. Hagrid smiled. And as Harry stepped down the stairs and said goodbye to Hagrid, he wondered if Hagrid had just drastically avoided answering his question.

Not that Harry would blame him. Maybe Harry shouldn't have pushed so far. It wasn't right for him to question Hagrid like that when he himself didn't feel like answering some of Hagrid's questions. Feeling slightly guilty, he headed towards the castle to search for Alex and Edward, especially Edward. He wanted to ask him just what he had been thinking when he had woken Harry up that morning.

"Well, don't hex me!" Edward cried, dashing behind Harry as Alex stalked back and forth with his wand drawn, looking very irate.

"I don't know why you're hiding behind me. I feel like hexing you, too," Harry said flatly.

"Yeah... but unlike Alex... you won't," Edward said. Harry grumbled incoherently only because Edward was right and that annoyed him.

"What were you thinking?" Alex yelled, waving his wand around wildly.

"Watch it, Alex! You'll poke Harry's eye out doing that," Edward warned, crouching lower behind Harry. Harry wondered if he darted fast enough, if that would leave Alex enough time to hex Edward.

"No I won't!" Alex quipped, but he lowered his wand anyway. "But what I will do is give you purple, oozing boils all over your face!" he threatened. "What were you thinking?"

"I needed competition. I'm going to be on the Gryffindor team, and there's only one other person in this school that rivals me. Besides, I overheard that Nott kid telling someone that the Slytherin tryouts were today, and that the Slytherin captain was particularly anxious to find a suitable Seeker. What better choice than Harry?" Edward said by answer. Alex looked at him blankly.

"Please tell me you're joking," he said evenly.

"Please tell me you're joking," Harry added, trying to glare at Edward over his shoulder.

"Course I am," Edward said, finally coming around Harry and smiling at him. "You needed to be on that team." Harry shifted uncomfortably.

"Why's that?" he mumbled.

"Because I know how tough it's going to be for you. I know how stressed you're going to get, and I also know that being on a broom up there is one way for you to forget about everything... if even for just a second," Edward replied. He turned to Alex who was bowing his head.

"But I'm not going to deny it. If I'm going to be on the team, I better go up against someone who can make the game really interesting. You can hex me for that," Edward laughed.

"I'm not," Alex grumbled. "I just wish you'd tell me things like that. I thought Snape was up to something. Thought he may... do something... I dunno," Alex fretted.

"I know," Edward grinned. Harry walked up to Alex.

"Thank you," he said. Alex looked up.

"For what?"

"For looking out for me," Harry said, feeling embarrassed but happy. Alex pushed Harry back.

"Why are you thanking me for that?" he asked, not looking at him. "You don't have to do that. You're... you're my family, too," he said softly. There have already been so many times when Harry had thought that he was going to fail—that he wasn't of strong caliber—that he was alone.

How could he be so stupid?

Edward suddenly grabbed Harry and ruffled his hair.

"Where's my thank you?" he asked.

"You went behind my back," Harry said stiffly. Edward's face fell, and he let go of Harry, his arms falling to his sides limply. "And if you hadn't, I'd probably have gone mad in a few months," Harry said sheepishly. It took Edward a second, and Harry wondered if he would have to spell it out when Edward grinned mischievously.

"A few months? I'd give you a few weeks. Thank Merlin for me and Alex," he said, grabbing his brother in a one arm hug. Harry rolled his eyes, but Edward, as egotistical as he sounded, was right. Was always right, really.

Harry wasn't alone. He had Alex and Edward, and even though he felt like he couldn't do what was asked of him—and there would be times that he felt he was going to fail—he was not alone in it.

"Guess what? I saw a unicorn today," said Harry, grinning. The twins couldn't believe what Harry had said, so he had to delve into the story of how, after his encounter with Snape, Hagrid had come to him, taken him into the forest, and had shown him a creature he may not see again.

Edward was unsurprisingly jealous, and Alex couldn't stop from asking Harry to tell it again and again. Harry had left out the weird feeling that had overtaken him only because he didn't want to ruin the story. And when Harry had retold and describe the forest and the unicorn again and again until it sounded like a fable even to him—somewhere along the way, the encounter with Snape had turned into the professor being a blood-thirsty vampire (all Edward's doing)—they talked about Quidditch, Edward and Harry each vowing that they would be the victors in their first match against one another.

"I still don't see why Flint made him Seeker," Theo spat contemptuously. Him and Draco were taking occupancy in the Slytherin common room, the only other inhabitants being a couple of fifth years.

"Yes, you didn't see him flying, so how could you know?" Draco replied, flipping tiredly through his Charms book.

"What's this? Are you defending him?" Theo bit back. Draco glanced up from the pages to fix the other a wary look.

"Hardly," he said simply.

"So then... do you agree with it?" Draco rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"That's not it either."

"Then—bloody hell! I don't get—"

"It's obvious who should have been made Seeker," Draco began, Theo making a disgruntled expression, "but even I have to admit he was... pretty skilled."

"I don't think that really answers anything I've asked," Theo replied, sinking into his plush chair. Draco marked the spot in his book and then shut it sharply.

"Harry was the only one flying out on that field. Where was his competition? That Gryffindor Cole? Among all of us, he automatically stood out, and then for him to catch that diving snitch..."

"What are you saying?" Theo asked, leaning forward as if Draco was about to reveal some sort of Quidditch conspiracy. Draco stood up, and after fixing his robes, he said flatly—

"Harry's a Slytherin." Theo stared at him blankly, obviously still waiting for the profound observation Draco had to make, no matter Draco had already given it. Not wanting to stand there and further witness Theo's vapid stare, Draco made for the boys' dormitory. Reaching the room and crossing the floor to his four-poster, he laid down onto his back and stared up at the ceiling peeking out from the green, velvet curtains surrounding his bed. He had to give Harry credit. He certainly wouldn't have thought of that little stunt. If he had, he most assuredly would have been made Seeker.

But he didn't think of it, so what position had he been given? Chaser. Draco let out a huff of indignation and rolled onto his side. Ridiculous. Then again, Harry's little exploit was more than Draco thought him capable of. It wasn't as if the manipulation was all that subtle, even if Theo didn't seem to notice. The fact that Harry was already out on the field flying and showing off means he was aiming for the Seeker position. And to think that Draco believed Harry's feigning of naiveté! All week Harry had been acting as if he didn't know that Quidditch try-outs were this weekend, having been pushed one week sooner than usual for Slytherins all because Professor Snape had wanted it that way. Even having that Gryffindor to help him out...

Harry was really quite the actor— quite the Slytherin, really.

Rolling onto his back again, he wondered how he would tell his father he hadn't been made Seeker. Of course, he could always lie and state that it was only because he had had a change of mind, deciding that being a Chaser was more thrilling than a being a Seeker, was why he had a different position on the team than his father was expecting. That reason should suffice.

With that solved, he went on to musing what it was that Professor Snape could have wanted with Harry. The professor had crossed that field awfully quick and hadn't looked to happy. Perhaps he was telling Harry he couldn't join the team because...

Draco muttered to himself to stop being idiotic. Harry was on the team. Nothing he could do about that just then. Finishing his homework is what should be taking precedence. Sitting up and leaning over to gather his bag on the floor, he heaved it up and sorted through its contents to find his Transfiguration homework. He situated it out before him with every intention of starting, but after he dipped his quill into the ink well, his pen poised and ready above his parchment, he kept thinking about Professor Snape and Harry and less on his homework. Then the more he thought about it, the more strange it seemed.

The stranger it seemed, the more plausible it became, in Draco's mind, of Snape finding some reason for Harry not to be on the team: he wasn't good enough, or Snape hadn't appreciated Harry's stunt, or... his marks weren't up to snuff (the last of the whims being very possible). Then Draco smirked. His professor, although vying for the House cup along with all the other teachers, would still find it unacceptable for a student of his to be on the team and fail a class, and to be honest, Harry wasn't a virtuoso with Potions. The only reason Harry was even managing to scrape the marks he received was because Draco had been helping him. How well would Harry perform then if Draco wasn't there to help?

Abandoning his homework for that night, Draco decided he much rather be in the company of his fellow second years, most of them being in the library, to the vacancy of the dormitory. Making his way through the common room, he nodded to Theo who glanced at him curiously, and then slipped out into the dungeon halls, smirking as he walked.

Dinner had been uncomfortable for Harry, much as he would like not to admit. Upon arriving at the Main Hall, it was instantly noted by Harry that where he usually sat was being occupied by first years. As he had neared the Slytherin table, the other observation he made was that all the second years were grouped together with Malfoy being in the middle of them. The third thing he'd perceived was that the only conceivable spot left at the table was stuck in the middle of the sixth and seventh years. None of that would have struck Harry as odd if it hadn't been for the way Nott had been glaring at him as he approached.

Doing the only thing he could have, Harry had seated amongst the older years. They had given him curious glances, but hadn't said

anything to him, and Harry had successfully pretended that he was really okay with the new seating arrangement. During the meal, he kept thinking more and more how odd it really all was. Not that he wanted to admit it but it wasn't as if Harry had ever ate alone since coming to Hogwarts. Malfoy had always included him in the group whether he had been the one to sit by Harry with the others following or by him dragging Harry to sit among them. Then it occurred to Harry that it wasn't odd at all but planned.

Upon recognition, he had put his fork down onto his plate none too discreetly, and stared down the length of the table. Malfoy had been pretending to be engrossed in a conversation with Parkinson, and the reason Harry knew he had been pretending was because Malfoy always complained about how dull he thought the girl was. When Malfoy had failed to look up at Harry all the time Harry had glared at him, Harry had shaken his head in disbelief.

By then, most of the surrounding older students were looking at Harry as if he were mad, probably because Harry had continued to shake his head while thinking how childish Malfoy really was. The fact that Malfoy had felt it necessary to purposely isolate Harry in an attempt to get back at him for the whole Quidditch tryouts ordeal was ridiculous. For awhile, Harry had kept thinking how much of a prat Malfoy was until he had realized something else.

Having Malfoy spurning whatever amicable relations they had might prove to be more of a hassle than he would like to acknowledge. Malfoy's isolation-ploy could put Harry in a further disadvantage because once Malfoy makes a target of him, they all will. Having gulped down his remaining bit of pumpkin juice, he had felt ill at ease. Having a line drawn with all but him on one side would certainly make things infinitely more difficult because then, not only would he have to watch what he said and did around Snape... but all the others as well.

But then, wasn't he already doing that? And when he really thought about it, he was probably doing it more so because the others were always around him when Malfoy was. Perhaps, then, having them all ignore him would prove to be an advantage? Harry didn't quite know where this turn in standings would lead him, but having noted everything he had noted, all throughout supper, he had still felt (and ashamedly so) quite isolated. So dinner had been very uncomfortable indeed.

After the meal, Harry had walked to the dungeons behind all the others. He had felt at times like Malfoy was watching him, possibly gauging his reaction, so Harry had acted as if he hadn't noticed anything different in the least. Then when he had reached the common room, he wavered for an instant. If he went to the dormitory, it might look as if he truly did notice Malfoy's intentions, but if he stayed with all the others in the common room, it would become far too tiresome to keep up the act himself. But as he had hesitated, all the second years had decided to go back to the library and resume homework.

There. Dilemma averted.

With the second years gone, Harry had trudged up to the dormitories. Excluding himself from a gathering at the library wasn't unusual for Harry. That had been occurring since the first day at Hogwarts (though it hasn't been so many days since). So in his bed was where Harry currently was. What he wouldn't give to be in Gryffindor.

With that petulant thought continuously running through his mind, Harry didn't even have to feign sleep when the other boys came back, for after awhile he drifted off, still dressed and the curtains of his bed left open.

Chapter 9: Looking Out for Edward, Too

Snape scowled as Potter botched, yet again, another one of his potions. It was intolerable. Not only did he have Potter in the school, he was in his house. Not only was he in his house, but he was proving to be as incapable as all the other dunderheads that fouled his class.

He whisked his robes behind him as he strode over to where Potter was standing. A plume of blue smoke was rising. If he didn't get there soon- Potter was just standing there- it was likely he'd have to send several students to the infirmary. He didn't have time for that- dealing with injured students and having someone clean up the mess. No, he needed to apparently rectify what Potter was so incapable of avoiding.

It was intolerable.

"Evanescio," he uttered as he waved his wand over the dangerously bubbling contents in Potter's cauldron. It didn't go amiss by Snape the boy tensing so drastically at his presence. "What are you thinking, Potter?" Snape demanded.

"I was just adding the lacewing, sir," Potter answered hurriedly, staring down at his now empty cauldron. Snape sneered.

"Then clearly the answer you should have given me was, 'I'm not thinking at all, sir'," he said. The boy looked up at him, but it was too brief for Snape to gleam anything from it.

"Sorry, sir?" Potter said quietly. Snape saw the boy's fists clench tightly by his sides.

"You were adding lacewing? I expected at least my own Slytherins to know better." He pointedly looked over at the board where the instructions he had written for the day were so vivid. After a moment, Potter looked over, too.

"Oh," was all he said.

"You will receive zero marks for today," he said coolly. Potter opened his mouth as if to protest, but Snape knew he wouldn't say anything. Potter closed his mouth. "A total disregard for such plainly

accessible instructions is a serious matter. One that could have serious consequences." Potter looked, if possible, even more crestfallen.

It wasn't as if Snape didn't expect this occurrence. This was the first time in the year that the students were not partnered up, and Snape wasn't so oblivious as to not notice just who had truly been brewing the potions when Potter had had a partner. Malfoy was, after all, a very bright and promising student. So leaving Potter to his own, apparently, would ensure less than perfect results, or dare he even think disastrous ones?

Scowling, he ordered the class to bottle their potions and turn them in. Once that had been so clamorously completed, he dismissed the class. Potter was always so surprisingly quick about leaving. It was remarkable how swiftly the boy could clean his mess, pack his things, and depart. Truly, though, many things about the boy were, for lack of a better word, remarkable.

Snape wondered what all the headmaster saw in the child—what the reputed Connell saw in him—what even the other faculty members thought. He also wondered just how much the boy really knew.

Not much, was what he thought as he sat at his desk, preparing himself for another round of idiocy, this time from the sixth years. Then again, that might not be necessarily true. Perhaps the boy knew more than he was letting on. Of course, that was highly unlikely. There weren't too many people in the world who could get something by him, especially when those persons could be accounted for on a single hand. But he had learned not to rule out anything too quickly.

It was more than just an annoyance to have Potter in his class, let alone his house—far more. But he had to abide by the headmaster's choices. So be it. Eventually, though, he would have what he expected in one form or another.

Edward grumbled into his book. He had decided that listening to Lockhart drone on was absolutely the worst! He was the savior of this—the hero of that—the inventor of that—the abolisher of this-! It was revolting! Did the man think that he could go up against someone like headmaster Dumbledore? That he could even compete with a true hero like Neville? Edward growled again

because he knew the answers to his questions, all of them exceedingly conceited on Lockhart's part.

Edward looked out of the window, his one solace in the drab conditions forced upon him by Hogwarts. The day was clear and sunny, and Edward, always choosing a seat closest to the window, was contented with the small pleasure of feeling the subtle warmth of the sun blanket him. He shifted his gaze back to the professor and swore he'd scratch his own eyes out if he saw the man brandish one more thrust of his wand only to knock something off his desk, or get it jammed in one of the many portraits of himself, or (and this was one of Edward's favorites) have it accidentally thrown at a student.

Not caring to witness the outcome of Lockhart's inane reenactments, Edward went back to gazing out the window. He sighed and resisted the urge to lay down his head and sleep under the warmth. He hadn't been sleeping well the past couple of days. In fact, after Harry's triumphant success at the Slytherin Quidditch tryouts, Edward had begun slumping. These things happened, though. He'd begin sleeping less, and thus, he'd become rather tetchy, and being tetchy made him irritated with himself, and lastly he'd sink into a slump.

Alex and Harry knew the signs, thankfully, and would give Edward his space when he needed it. It was a boundary issue that his father never quite understood, so when Edward became like this, his father would always push him and push him. But the man wasn't here. No, Edward had new annoyance to deal with.

He heard Lockhart boast about his, "voracious overthrow of a Giant leader in the mountains of Wales," and couldn't help but snarl at it's ridiculousness. Alex glanced at him warily, and Edward looked away. It wasn't his fault that Lockhart was the biggest irritant he had ever known.

Besides Lockhart, another matter was straining Edward's nerves, but his head was so muddled then that he couldn't decipher what that matter was exactly. He just knew that there was some other kind of weight bearing down on him, but for the life of him he didn't know what it was. He did know, however, that the week, his second week of Hogwarts, was going to be taxing. More so than the first.

And how did he know that? Because Edward knew. It was the simple, undeniable truth because he could already feel it.

Sensing Alex's eyes upon him, he smiled at his brother sheepishly, the expression seeming strained, even to him. He was sure it looked it, too, because Alex looked even more worried, but his brother didn't say anything—wouldn't say anything. Edward appreciated that. Not that he didn't feel guilty for making his brother worry, it was just that as agitated as he felt there was little he could do to rectify it. It was like waiting out a storm.

Hearing a yelp of pain, Edward perked up drastically. In the end, it seemed as though Lockhart had been successful at injuring a student. It was just Lockhart's misfortune that that student happened to be Neville. Standing up abruptly, Edward made his way over to his asinine teacher, much to his brother's silent but animated protests.

"Oh! Mr. Cole! Come to volunteer have you?" Lockhart spoke, completely ignoring Neville who was covered in a viscous and mucky substance. "Fret not, I am a pro when performing the ever dangerous Burning Hex," and with wand raised, the professor readied himself, forming the first syllable of *Calidus* while Edward reflexively called out, "*Expelliarmus*." Lockhart's wand went soaring behind him, issuing several snorts and laughs from the students.

He glanced at Neville to see if he was okay—and he was, the Goop Hex not causing any pain but still being uncomfortable none the less—and then intoned a cleaning spell to remove the substance. Neville looked stunned, and then realizing it was Edward who had un-mucked him, he thanked him eagerly. Edward smiled at him and waved dismissively. Once his professor had retrieved his wand, he straightened out his hair and approached Edward haughtily.

"Good show, my lad, but as you can see, I was demonstrating the incorrect stance. One must always be wary of such an easy blunder," Lockhart laughed, looking about the room. Edward stared at his professor blankly.

"Actually, sir, I was wondering if I could get to the loo," Edward announced blandly. Several of the boys snickered while Alex rolled his eyes. Lockhart looked taken aback for an instance and then waved him off.

"Ah, yes, yes. Of course. Hurry back," Lockhart said. "Or you'll miss another enlightening demonstration!" he added with a wink. Feeling nauseated by that but still managing a smile, Edward went off for the loo. He didn't really have to go. It was just the only excuse he could come up with in that moment for walking up to the front. Walking along the first floor corridors, he kept next to the windows feeling a strong pull to go outside. It was such a warm day, and he really felt like going out there, picking a spot under a tree, and sleeping. That should wear away at some of the peevishness he felt.

Although, he did feel pretty proud, too, in that moment. He might not have stopped the spell from hitting Neville (he blamed his feeling out of sorts for that one), but he still managed to ramify the mishap while also at the expense of Lockhart! In the future, though, he would just have to be more observant. Of course, when he thought about it, being outside the classroom with Neville still at the mercy of Lockhart wasn't very prudent or preemptive.

Turning around back towards class, he had a delightful thought. If he could successfully pull similar stunts on Lockhart (without Neville's forced participation, of course) than that meant he had at last found some small redeeming quality to the Defense class. Wonders never cease, he mused as he entered the class, Neville still free of any goo or muck.

Sending Hedwig off with his second letter to Mr. Cole, Harry decided to skip breakfast that Friday morning. The prospect of eating in solitude while the rest of the second years ate contentedly while sneaking in cursory glances here and there at him was as unappealing as it was becoming unappetizing. Harry knew that Mr. Cole would be, for lack of a better word, bored by his letter, but he had promised to keep Mr. Cole updated on all that he did, and he figured making the Quidditch team was news that deserved mentioning.

Besides, he also felt obligated to inform Mr. Cole on how his two sons were doing—Harry didn't think that either of them had sent a letter yet. Alex, he wrote, was doing fine, but that Edward was feeling... moody as of late. Not that Mr. Cole should be surprised by that, of course. He also inquired about Mrs. Cole, wondering when she was to return because dealing with all the minute details from moving must be irritating. He had nothing more to add concerning

his task, so that's why he felt his letter would be of no concern to Mr. Cole.

As he neared the bottom of the owlery tower, he ran straight into Alex, sending the younger twin crashing to the ground.

"Ah, Alex! Are you okay? Sorry! I didn't see you!" Harry fretted as he hovered over the felled boy. He helped the other to his feet and mumbled another apology.

"What are you getting your knickers in a bunch for?" Alex teased as he rubbed his back. "I was the one running and not paying attention. They call that consequence," he smiled. "Listen, though," he cut in before Harry could apologize more, "You know this weekend is when the rest of the Quidditch tryouts are being held?" Alex whispered. Harry nodded, still not convinced that Alex had forgiven him for running into him. "What are we going to do?" Alex asked worriedly. Harry stared at him blankly for a moment. The other boy sighed. "Edward isn't feeling too well, you know." It took another second, but once what Alex had said sunk in, Harry smacked his forehead.

"Merlin! You're right! I—I wasn't even thinking," he exclaimed. Alex was bobbing his head while staring at Harry's forehead.

"You alright there?" he asked.

"Yeah, but Edward! When are the tryouts being held for Gryffindor?" Harry asked. Alex shook his head.

"I dunno. Oliver Wood, the captain, hasn't finalized a day yet," Alex sighed.

"He's cutting it pretty close isn't he?"

"You haven't met him, Harry. This guy is continuously strategizing. He keeps saying that he doesn't know what day will optimize the screening process," Alex explained.

"Screening process? There will be... more?" Harry asked.

"Stages of the tryouts? Yeah. For Wood, you can't be too careful," Alex said.

"But that's good then, isn't it? I mean, it'll give Edward another chance to tryout if he, you know, misses the first," Harry said hopefully.

"Maybe, but I think the tryouts are only going to last one day. One very. Long. Day." he said. Harry stammered around, trying to think of a backup, but nothing came to mind. Do teachers normally reschedule tryouts all because one student couldn't make it? Harry didn't think so. "I've been trying to get a hold of Wood, but when he's not in class, he's on the field. And when he's on the field, there is no force on this world that can divert his attention from Quidditch," Alex spoke. "But listen, just, uh, think about it, will you? About how we're going to... You know..." Alex stammered quietly. Harry smiled softly and nodded his head. Alex was a good brother. Sometimes, Harry even forgot that Edward was the older of the two (even if they were technically twins), Alex always seeming more mature.

"We should get to class," Harry said.

"So what'd you send off?" Alex inquired as they made their way to the grand staircase.

"Just... a letter," Harry said simply. Alex nodded understandingly and didn't say anything more, and then they split up, Harry continuing downstairs for Transfiguration while Alex left at the third floor for Charms. Harry should really think of something. Edward had gone out of his way (albeit behind Harry's back) and had helped Harry get on the Slytherin team, so the least Harry could do, to repay him and as a friend, was to do the same in return. If being on a broom was therapeutic to him, then it was also true for Edward, and like hell Harry wouldn't help his friend! He'd better of think of something and something good.

Saturday arrived just as Harry had known it would (as much as he would like to, he didn't have the power to delay days), and it became obvious that Edward was in no state to fly let alone tryout. Skulking around the stands surrounding the Quidditch field, Harry had promised Edward to scope out the competition among the aspiring Gryffindor players. Two third years showed some potential, but Harry was happy to see that no one else was as nearly as talented as Edward. As he thought this, a stout, red-faced boy flew straight into an older year, their brooms colliding, and both of them were

nearly thrown off. Distracted by the collision, another girl carrying a Quaffle threw the ball, paying no heed as to where she aimed it so that the quaffle shot towards a lanky older boy, hitting him right in the face.

The disastrous events, though amusing to Harry, was a complete outrage to Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor Captain who stood opposite of Harry across the field. Blowing his whistle, the tall fifth year called for all the flyers back down to the ground. Once all had landed, some more gracefully than others, Wood stood there for minutes on end, staring at each of them with scorn. When all the contenders looked equally shamefaced, Wood started in on them.

Harry couldn't hear what was being said, but he gauged by the expressions of all the aspirant flyers that it wasn't anything favorable. Once the tirade was over and all the others had left except for Wood, Harry pulled himself away from the stands and approached the Gryffindor Captain. As he neared him, Wood snapped his attention onto Harry, fixing him with a look that made Harry feel very unsure of himself.

"What do you want?" Wood asked roughly, and Harry imagined that Wood had stopped himself from tacking on a scathing 'little snake' at the end of it.

"I, uh, was wondering..." Harry faltered. Wood waited impatiently, calling back the Quidditch equipment with an *accio*. All the Quidditch balls came soaring at them—Harry had to duck so as not to be knocked over by one of the bludgers, and he thought he saw Wood smirk from that—and Wood fitted them all neatly into their spots within a case. "Sorry to bother you, but I have something to ask you," Harry said evenly.

Wood looked up him and asked, "What is it?" Harry stopped himself from blinking stupidly. He didn't think it would have been so easy to get Wood to listen. He had heard of Wood's intolerance for Slytherins and especially Slytherin Quidditch members.

"It seems there was little prospect for any real champions out there," Harry began. Wood rounded on him before Harry could even register what was happening.

"What? You spying on the Gryffindor team?" Wood demanded, hovering over Harry in a menacing and very tall way.

"No! It's nothing like that!" Harry said, thinking that perhaps being vague with the Gryffindor wasn't the smartest of ideas. "It's just, I have a favor to ask." Wood leaned back, smiling cynically.

"You have a favor to ask of me?"

"Hear me out, will you?" Harry snapped back defensively. Honestly! The whole Gryffindor-Slytherin divide was beyond inconvenient and irritating. "My... my brother, Edward—You know him—He's the best there is," Harry stated simply.

"Yeah, well, I didn't see him here today," Wood said, looking at Harry suspiciously.

"That's what I came here for—to tell you that he wasn't feeling well—really sick actually—and that if you could maybe hold another tryout, you won't be disappointed," Harry said quickly. Wood continued to observe Harry as if he would at any moment turn into a cobra and bite him.

"Why do you care?" Wood asked after a minute. Harry felt himself turn red in the face. What was with all these ridiculous suspicions?

"He's my family, isn't he? Shouldn't that be reason enough?" Harry exclaimed. "And if you're not satisfied with that then it's because he helped me get on the Slytherin team, and I could at least repay him the same respect. Besides," and Harry fixed Wood with the best arrogant look he could, "if you want even the slightest chance of beating the Slytherin team and me, you need him." Harry didn't relish in pretending to be cocky, but he also knew that Wood was a very paranoid Captain, and if Harry's loyalty to Edward didn't win him any points in this persuasion, then scarring Wood into thinking his team was lacking was a sufficient tactic. Wood stood there stunned, and Harry inwardly wondered if he had gone too far. Then, abruptly, Wood started to laugh, doubled over and grabbing at his sides even. Harry looked around cautiously, wondering if he should go find help or something—perhaps Wood had snapped—when Wood stood to his full height.

"Tell you what, Potter—"

Harry didn't know that Wood had known his name all that time. What was the hostility for then, he thought angrily.

"As it happens to be, the turnout this year was more than dismal," Wood said as he scratched the bottom of his chin, "and I may just have to reschedule another tryout." Harry stood still, waiting for the inevitable catch, but Wood continued to smile at him.

"Really?" Harry ventured.

"Yeah... really," Wood responded slowly. Harry resisted to the urge to Whoop! and so thanked Wood instead.

"Brilliant! Really! You won't regret it!" Harry shouted back at the Gryffindor as he dashed off the field. He felt so elated as he jogged towards the doors of Hogwarts. He wished he could immediately tell Edward. Of course, he couldn't do it that night; he'd have to wait until the other was feeling better.

Well, he thought triumphantly as he dashed along the halls inside the castle, If I can't tell Edward, I'll just have to tell Alex first! Figuring the library was the most likeliest place for Alex to be at the moment, he set off at a brusque pace feeling victorious for the first time since arriving at Hogwarts. Even if he had little to do with Wood's decision, the fact that he could deliver such cheerful news was good for Harry.

The next day, and after all of Harry's homework was finished, he decided it was about time he'd visit Edward. The boy was most likely snoozing away in the Gryffindor tower, so Harry wondered how, exactly, he was going to be able to get in to see him. He could probably wait outside the portrait for someone to come out and then relay a message to Edward (or Alex), but Harry didn't think that anyone would be so willing on the uptake. Sighing morosely to himself, he packed some of his books back into his trunk and the others into his bag. Maybe he could send an owl to them and the bird would tapped unmercifully on one of their windows, letting them know Harry wanted to see them. He shook his head at such a thought. It should not be this difficult to see a friend from another house.

Stretching as he stood up, Harry heard the door to the dormitories open and in stepped Malfoy. He glanced at Harry for a second,

Harry still having his arms stretched up over his head, and then he dismissed him entirely. Harry rolled his eyes. Malfoy was a piece of work. Going from hanging around Harry incessantly to not at all was something only a prat like Malfoy would do. Not wanting to be bothered by it, Harry left without saying a word. Leaving the common room, he thought he could perhaps just ask the portrait herself (or itself) to convey a message for him.

As he ascended the dungeon steps and reached the main floor, he passed another person heading down.

"Oh! Alex!" Harry greeted seeing the twin. Alex stopped on the fifth step down and turned around.

"Good! I was just looking for you!" the other smiled. "Edward just woke up," he said cheerfully as he skipped steps at a time to be on level with Harry.

"How is he?" Harry asked as they both made their way to the main staircase.

"Oh, you know... groggy and..."

"Peevish?" Harry finished. Alex nodded. Then he smiled.

"Of course he'll chipper up when he hears what you have to tell him!"

Harry looked at him confusedly and asked, "You mean you didn't?"

"Course not! That's all yours to tell," Alex said as they climbed the stairs. Finally reaching the portrait of the fat lady, already waiting at it was that bushy haired girl he'd seen around. She paid them no heed as she tore through her bag muttering something incoherent. Harry gave Alex a baffled look, but Alex only smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Can I help you with something Hermione?" Alex offered. At first she didn't look up or even acknowledge that someone else had spoken, but Alex waited patiently as if this sort of thing happened often. And sure enough, a minute later, the girl looked up.

"No, just wondering where I could have put my copy of Droughts of Death," she said evenly and as if she hadn't missed a beat.

"Droughts of Death?" Harry repeated, curious as to what someone would want with that book. It wasn't as awful as it sounded; it was just rather thick and filled with obscure potions, many of which were discredited as having absolutely no affect whatsoever.

"Yes. I need a reference from it for Professor Snape's essay. I can't remember if the Skeletally Drink requires amaranth or not," she explained as she once again raided her bag.

"What's that got to do with Snape's essay?" Alex asked. "All it asks us to do is list and explain the rate of effect of some potions." At that, she sighed warily.

"Some potions have addictive properties and when certain potions are repeatedly taken, their 'rate of effect' is altered, wouldn't you agree?" she said stiffly.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Of course," Alex said quickly. Harry figured he did so just to avoid sparking any sort of lecture from the girl, though Harry did have to agree with her. He began to nod his head unknowingly.

"So you agree?" she directed at Harry. Alex, seeing Harry's startled expression at being so forcefully addressed, snickered.

"I, um—Yes," Harry replied. "If... If someone keeps taking the same potion, the body could acclimate to the ingredients, building up a tolerance, and, uh, therefore... slowing down the rate of... effect..." Harry trailed off, feeling stupid for explaining himself. Alex patted him on the back consolingly, but rather than looking bothered or annoyed by Harry's explanation, Hermione smiled.

"That's exactly what I was going to say," she beamed, "and the Skeletally Drink is one such potion that is highly addictive." Again, Harry nodded. "You're Harry Potter," she stated firmly. He looked to Alex questioningly, but he wasn't paying attention as he was waving hullo to another Gryffindor down the corridor.

"Um, yes. I am," and he extended his hand. "It's nice to meet you." Hermione looked confused by the extension, but she took his hand and shook it nonetheless.

"I'm Hermione Granger. Edward and Alex talk about you all the time," she said, smiling. Harry blushed, and Alex snapped back to attention.

"Look here, that's not all we—You're embarrassing him," Alex stammered. Hermione waved at him dismissively.

"I suppose you're going to see Edward?" she inquired.

"Yeah, he hasn't been feeling too well," Harry affirmed.

"I noticed," she replied, adjusting the strap over her arm. "But it seems a lot of us aren't feeling too well lately," she added vaguely.

"Are you not feeling very good?" Harry asked genuinely. For a fraction of a second, Hermione looked stunned by such a question, but she recovered quickly.

"Oh no. Not me. I'm fine. But Ron's sister hasn't been feeling too well either. I think she may have the flu. I keep telling her she needs to see Madam Pomfrey, but she won't listen to me. I just hope I don't catch it. It would get in the way of my studies," she said matter-of-factly. "Well, I'm going to the library to see if they have a copy of the book. It was nice meeting you," she said.

"You, too." With that, she gave Alex a friendly reminder that the History of Magic essay was due tomorrow and that Edward better not ask her for her notes as he seems always in the habit of doing. Alex assured her that if it was notes his brother was fishing for he would have long since looted them from his own things and that she hadn't need to worry. She looked unconvinced but left all the same.

"That girl..." Alex trailed tiredly, rubbing at his temples. "Ron told me he had a nightmare about her once in which she came at him with all these rabid books on leashes. She turned them loose, and then they started trying to devour him... or shut their... covers on him... I don't really remember," Alex said. Harry laughed at the thought of disease-ridden, carnivorous books, but the girl hadn't seemed so bad. A bit pushy, but nice.

Addressing the Fat Lady, who must have a talent for ignoring students until they have need of her, Alex gave the password Leo

Nobilis. As the portrait swung open to reveal a tiny hole through the wall, Alex smiled as if to say, 'Go ahead and use this password whenever you want.' Or maybe that's just what Harry wanted it to mean. Scrambling through the hole after Alex, the room was revealed to be of spacious comfort with high-back, plush chairs seated all about and atop rugs spread across the scuffed wooden floors with candles and sconces throughout to emit light. But best of all, were all the windows to reveal the greenery of Hogwarts. No one was in the room at the moment aside from Alex and Harry, which he was thankful for. He really didn't want Alex to explain the presence of an infiltrating Slytherin.

"Pretty good, isn't it?" Alex said as Harry looked about longingly. He could have lived in this warm and inviting place with Alex and Edward. He was afraid that the dungeons would seem all the more dreary now that he had come here. Shaking his thoughts, he followed Alex up one of two spiral staircases. Opening the door to the boy's dormitories, the room was really no different from Harry's. There were five four-posters with trunks at each end; clothing, books, and other objects were scattered about haphazardly; and the room was of the same size. The only difference was that this room had windows and a different color scheme.

Laying face down with his head at the foot of the bed was the still form of Edward. Harry glanced at Alex warily thinking that if Edward had fallen asleep, he'd better come back another time. Alex wasn't looking at him though. Instead, he shoved Edward's covered face further into the mattress. Edward made a muffled sound of protest and smacked Alex's hand away.

"Harry's here," Alex said nonchalantly, as if nothing had happened. Edward glared up at Alex looking disoriented and wobbly. "I'm gonna go see if I can goad the house elves into making a snack for Edward," he said to Harry. "You know how he is when he hasn't had that much food," he stated sourly.

"Watch it!" Edward slurred. "I bite, you know!" he threaten, waving a staggering finger at his brother.

"Yes, I know," Alex shouted as he headed out the door and down the stairs. Harry hovered for a moment, trying to decide if it was best if he remained where he stood or not, before he decided on sitting on the other end of Edward's bed.

"You don't look so worse for wear," Harry ventured, smiling sheepishly at Edward who peeked at him over his shoulder.

"But not my finest of hours either," Edward snorted. He really didn't look so horrible. A bit peaky, but not as pale as Harry would have thought.

"What did Madam Pomfrey have to say?" Harry asked as he messed with an assortment of Quidditch figurines on Edward's bedside table.

"On, you know, the usual—I need to rest more, eat more, drink more," he said tiredly.

"You mean, someone's actually encouraging your voracious eating habits?" Harry asked, shocked. Edward looked over at him, but seeing that Harry was obviously joking, he smiled and went to try and kick Harry off the bed. Instead, he managed to kick Harry's glasses off, sending them shuttling across the floor.

"Merlin, Edward!" Harry said exasperatedly.

"No, Harry. It's Edward Cole, though some have referred to me as the modern Merlin," Edward commented as he watched Harry grope along the floor for his spectacles.

"Yes, I'm so sure of that," Harry muttered. Finally finding his glasses, he wiped off the dust and finger prints put them back on. "Thanks for the help, by the way," Harry grunted.

"Harry!" Edward gasped. "You expect an invalid like me to leave the healing comforts of my bed?"

"If that's the case," Harry said, adjusting his frames, "Then I guess you really can't ever play Quidditch again."

"Ugh! Don't remind me," Edward huffed remorsefully, stuffing his face back into his mattress. "Imusstyots," he mumbled incoherently. Staying out of reach of Edward's kicking range, Harry sat on the bed he could tell was Alex which was right across from Edward's.

"What's that?" Harry asked. Edward leaned up and stared at Harry sadly.

"I said I missed tryouts." Harry smiled while nodding in agreement. "Yeah, thanks Harry," he sniffed darkly.

"And you know," Harry started, laying down across Alex's bed, "Not any of them were any good."

"Is this supposed to make me feel better? Now, not only am I'm supposed to miss out on actually playing in the games, but I get to watch awful substitutes play in my stead?" and Edward squinted at Harry. "You're not very good at the cheering up thing today are you?" he said accusingly.

"Say what you will, but I've heard talk," Harry said vaguely, tracing random patterns in the stone ceiling. Edward sat up straighter.

"What kind of talk?" he asked suspiciously.

"Oh, you know, just that it seems Wood couldn't find one suitable player."

"What a shame," Edward said grimly.

"I know, and because of that," and Harry rolled onto his side so he could look at Edward, "he told me he's just going to have to schedule another tryout."

"..."

Harry counted to twenty in his head while also guessing at which number he'd be on by the time his news sunk into Edward's recently enfeebled mind.

"Wait..." Edward began, sitting up fully. Harry mirrored him and waited for the older twin to come to a conclusion. When he did, though, Harry couldn't stop from laughing. "NO!" Edward exclaimed, jumping up onto his bed, his head almost hitting one of the rails that held up the curtains. "NO!" he repeated. Harry smiled widely. "WOO HOO! Fortune's Felicity!" Edward shouted, thudding back onto his bed which groaned in protest with a loud CREEEEAK.

"How do you know this?" Edward asked, as if unwilling to believe such good tidings.

"I asked your captain. He didn't tell me a day, though, but I'm sure it'll be next weekend," Harry explained. Edward leapt off the bed and pummeled into Harry, clutching onto Harry's head and shaking him this way and that.

"You dear, sweet, kind soul!" Edward cooed loudly. "That's just the news a dying man needs to hear," Edward cried with pretend sobs. Through the choke hold, Harry reached over and flicked Edward's nose. "Ow! What was that for?" Edward said, releasing his hold on Harry to cover his reddened nose.

"Don't say that," Harry scolded, straightening out his twisted clothes and ruffled hair. Edward smiled apologetically and bowed his head.

"Yeah, but I'm all better now!" he chimed. Harry couldn't help but smile. In that moment, he felt more happy than he had in awhile. All the pressures of carrying out his tasks successfully had turned into a weight that seemed to become a part of Harry, and he felt that if he could just steal more moments like these then he'd be able to find the strength to carry that weight. Edward commenced in telling Harry how really asking for another tryout was foolish because once Edward was on the team, Harry hadn't a glimmer of hope of beating him. Harry, too happy for Edward to argue, just let Edward ramble on and on.

Soon after, Alex returned with ham sandwiches—three to be exact. Harry had the sneaking suspicion that Alex had returned long ago from his excursion, but had waited outside the door to allow Harry to share his good news. Unfortunately, Harry only had time after that to finish his sandwich before Edward—who had long ago inhaled his own sandwich—had fallen asleep and was snoring loudly. Alex walked Harry to the portrait hole after that, the common room still strangely deserted.

"You know, you can come here whenever you want," Alex said softly. Harry turned around, his knee propped against the edge of the hole, ready for climbing in.

"You sure? I mean for you and Edward's it's fine, but what about for the—"

"Of course they're fine with it," Alex interjected. Harry looked unconvinced. "And if they're not, then they're just going to have to be," Alex proclaimed defiantly. Harry smiled appreciatively, wishing he could extend the same courtesy to Alex and Edward, but he knew, and was sure Alex knew, too, that that wasn't possible. The longing to be in Gryffindor resonated within him again with a resentful pang.

"See you tomorrow," Harry said on the other side after he climbed through the hole.

"Yeah. See ya," Alex replied. Then the portrait swung close on Alex's face. Harry stood there for a moment longer, not wanting to return to the bleak dungeons after that. But to the dungeons he must. He just had to keep telling himself that it wasn't as if he didn't see Edward and Alex all the time—he saw them plenty (though not as much as he liked)—it's just (and this Harry admitted grudgingly) with his isolation from the rest of the Slytherins, he just felt like if only he had been placed in Gryffindor, he wouldn't feel like such the loner, which he did currently as he headed back to the Slytherin House. Maybe if he hung around the Gryffindors enough, he could ask for a transfer and convince the Sorting hat of it too. Then again, wouldn't manipulating the situation be the very thing a Slytherin would do?

A/N: Who has gone to see the sixth HP? Hope all of you have! If not... GO! Off with you now! Then come back here again!

Chapter 10: Osiris, Piast, and the Pumpkin Patch

September ended in a monotonous blur of weeks signaling in the chilly advent of October. Everyday Harry would wake up, eat breakfast alone, go to classes to sit by himself (even in Potions he was alone unless forced to be the partner of someone which always ended up being either Crabbe or Goyle—whichever one of the brutes Malfoy didn't sit with), have lunch with Edward and Alex (his one solace), have more classes, eat dinner alone or sit in the library alone, and then he'd fall asleep just to repeat the vicious cycle all over again the next day. However, there were some days that he'd go visit Hagrid.

Recently, though, Hagrid was so preoccupied with his garden, growing, the giant had said, what will be the biggest pumpkins Harry would ever see that even when Harry visited, that he wasn't much for company, but Harry didn't want to continuously bother Alex and Edward who were both busy with their own things. Though he had gone back to the Gryffindor tower a few times (much to the chagrin of some of the Gryffindors), he didn't frequent the house too often, always feeling out of place. Alex and Edward always tried their best to include Harry in whatever they were doing, but after awhile having the others like Seamus, Dean, and even Ron continuously giving him suspicious looks was enough to assure Harry that he wasn't as welcomed as Edward and Alex tried to make him feel. And then, being in the Slytherin dungeons wasn't any better, for whenever Harry decided to take occupancy in the common room, the atmosphere would get so heavy with the weight of the stares that it shattered whatever backbone Harry thought he had being in the midst of fledgling Death Eaters.

All this Harry contemplated as he bit into his morning toast, isolated as usual from the rest of the second years. The only thing that would make this breakfast different from the ones he'd been experiencing the last couple of weeks was that he was expecting a letter. Not from Mr. Cole, though. It had been decided by the man that the letters he would send would no longer be sent with the rest of the morning delivery. Harry thought that that was actually not the brightest ideas. If the whole point of these "exchanges" was to be discreet, than Harry receiving letters at odd times during the day would bring more attention than when everyone else was getting theirs. He'd have to remember to tell Mr. Cole that.

Besides, Harry didn't particularly want to be on the continual lookout for his snowy white owl, in case she would bear one of Mr. Coles important notices. What if he wasn't there—wherever it was Hedwig would arrive—to receive the letters, and then someone else was there instead to intercede? Yes, Harry thought it best to tell Mr. Cole that getting the notes during the morning delivery would be the best thing. And as he decided this, in swarmed the many owls of the Hogwarts students. Spotting his owl immediately, he waited for her to descend and drop off his expected letter. Instead of one envelope, however, he removed three from her beak. He replaced those with a piece of his toast which Hedwig preferred much more to the paper.

"Good girl," he praised as he stroked her head. He shuffled through his mail. There was the letter he had been waiting for, another one looked to be from Hagrid (the tiny, almost illegible scrawl was distinctly his), and the third was unmarked. He flip it over and still nothing. Harry was instinctively cautious. He wouldn't open it just yet, not sure of what the contents were, but would save it for later until he, Alex, and Edward looked over it and checked it for tampering.

Pocketing the strange letter, he focused on the one from Hagrid. Opening it and reading it over, it seemed that Hagrid wished to see him after classes (if Harry had the time, of course, Hagrid had emphasized). He wrote his reply saying that yes, he would love to come by to visit, and then refolded it. This he gave to Hedwig, the other two letters didn't need replies. With letter in tow, she gave him one peck on the back of his hand and then was off with the rest of the birds. With his owl gone, he averted his attention to the last of the letters. This one would be from Mrs. Cole. He wiggled his finger within the fold of the envelope and just as he was about to rip the letter open, Malfoy stopped behind him.

"Hello, Malfoy," Harry tried to say casually, not looking behind him. What on earth could this be about?he thought curiously, the letter poised in his hand. For seconds Malfoy didn't say anything. If he thought that Harry was going to turn around and devote his entire attention on him, then he was horribly mistaken. Harry was content to just sit there as if there wasn't a spoiled second year hovering behind him.

Malfoy must have sensed this and so told Harry, in a most impatient manner, that the first Quidditch practice of the season would start next week.

"Alright. I'll be sure to be there," Harry said nonchalantly. Malfoy did not reply, but Harry sensed him leaving. After that, it was time for class, so Harry saved the letter for later. Gathering his things, he caught Alex's eye from across the hall and waved bye to him. The younger Cole twin waved back and then grabbed his brother by the shoulder to whip him around. Harry watched as Edward looked about ready to pummel Alex, but when he noticed his brother pointing, he stopped to look over at Harry. Harry gave another wave, this time feeling rather stupid, but Edward returned the gesture animatedly... quite madly, actually. Harry watched the twins leave for their classes and decided, by the way McGonagall was advisedly watching him, that it was time for him to make off for Herbology.

"I don't think there's anything suspicious about it," Alex affirmed as the trio huddled together by their tree during lunch. They had just finished eating and were now examining the mysterious letter Harry had received earlier.

"What do you mean there's nothing suspicious about it? The absence of writing isn't enough for you?" Edward exclaimed. He turned to Harry who was performing another spell on the letter to check for hexes. "Go ahead and open it, Harry. The great sleuth over here says it's fine."

"Oh sure! Say it like that," Alex huffed. "What I meant to say..."—Edward rolled his eyes at that—"... is that we've performed all the essential spells to check for tampering, and as you can see... the letter is still intact," Alex explained matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, which makes it all the more suspicious," Edward argued, looking at the letter Harry flipped over in his hand with mistrust.

"I think I have to agree with Alex," Harry stated with a sigh. "I can't find anything wrong with it." Edward threw his hands up in the air in defeat. Alex and Harry leaned over the letter each looking at it's cream façade. With one wary look to Alex, Harry ran his finger along the underside flap of the envelope.

"I can't watch," Edward said dramatically, standing up and walking a few paces away. He had his wand drawn though, and despite what he said about not watching, he was staring at the letter and Harry intently.

Inhaling in and with an encouraging nod from Alex, Harry opened the letter and—

Nothing.

Harry slid out a single, small piece of parchment. Alex relaxed, and Harry heard Edward give a sigh of relief. Turning the paper over he saw an unfamiliar and elegant writing.

"Read it aloud," Edward said, coming forward. At first, Harry read through it to himself and then again to be sure of what he read. He felt his brows furrow together in confusion. "Well?" came Edward's voice. Harry shook his head and read.

"Well, it says—'Conspiracies are formed everywhere—even by those you may trust most. But when a truth is brought before you, it is up to you to either delve deeper to find the absolutes or to toss away the knowledge and further the connivance...'—" Harry finished reading and looked up to Alex and Edward who had echoing expressions of bewilderment.

"Does it say who sent it?" Alex asked, leaning over Harry's arm to read over the letter again. At the bottom of the writing was a name in an elegant, slanting scrawl.

Osiris

"Osiris?" Edward repeated. "Doubt that's the git's real name."

"Look who's being the super-sleuth now," Alex said sarcastically.

"What kind of loonies have you been talking to?" Edward asked ignoring Alex's comment.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. How was he supposed to know? As far as he was concerned, there were loads of peculiar people right at Hogwarts that could be capable of this kind of thing. Or maybe it was a practical joke from Malfoy. He had been there right as Harry had gotten his mail. Maybe he wanted to make sure Harry had gotten it. He was probably laughing it up right now. Harry looked about him suspiciously trying to see if he could spot out any pale,

blond hair. He wouldn't put it past Malfoy to pull a childish ploy such as this.

"Oy, Harry. What're you looking at?" Edward asked, glancing around, too.

"It's just—Maybe Malfoy—?" Harry said, straining his vision to look through the dark windows of the Hogwarts Great Hall, but nothing resembling Malfoy could he see.

"What—you think this is something to do with Malfoy?" Edward asked unconvinced.

"Sure. Why not? I told you about how he's got all his Slytherin cronies to completely ignore me," Harry said tersely.

"Does that bother you?" Alex asked.

"What? No, it's just that's what the prat's done, so I don't think this is beyond him. He probably got tired of me ignoring his...er... ignoring of me," Harry explained. Alex nodded his head slowly.

"I dunno, mate," Edward started doubtfully. "What kind of joke is it to him to talk about 'conspiracies'?" Edward asked, taking the letter from Harry's hand. Then Alex gasped. Both Harry and Edward looked to him concernedly.

"What if the conspiracy is..."—and Alex swallowed hard—"... about us?" The three fell silent, each imagining the sinister things that that possibility could entail. Finally, after the taught moment, Edward snorted.

"No way. That's absurd," he declared.

"Is it really?" Alex said darkly. Edward shifted his gaze away.

"Of course it is. We haven't done anything yet," he said. Harry bunched his slacks into his fists.

"But I've already sent a couple of letters," he whispered. Of course that's what Osiris's letter had been about! They had found Harry out! He knew he wasn't cut out for this ridiculous undertaking!

"Yeah—saying what? 'Nothing going on here—Same old, same old—The days are long and boring—'? Honestly!" Edward huffed, plopping down unto the ground.

"The first one I sent, I talked about... you know... him," Harry admitted.

"To say that he was your Head of House as well as the Potions Master, right?" Edward asked. Harry inclined his head in affirmation. "Isn't that normal? To tell your guardian what house you're in and just who's in charge of it?"

"Edward's right, Harry. It wasn't anything you've done," Alex said consolingly.

"You see? That's how awful we are at this! We can't even tell where I've messed up!" Harry exclaimed. Edward smacked him across the back of the head. "What was that for?" Harry said, rubbing the now sore spot. Edward looked at him darkly, and Alex had averted his eyes looking disappointed. "What, guys?"

"Don't say things like that," Edward sternly said. "You haven't messed up anything."

"Maybe, but—" Harry tried to say.

"No—'maybe, but'—Harry," Edward cut in. "That's how it is. This...letter has nothing to do with what we're all doing," he said with such finality. Harry bowed his head. Edward was just saying that to make Harry feel better, but if Harry thought about it long enough, he was sure he'd find the reason as to how this letter was meant to expose them and how that was all his fault.

"Come on, mate. Edward's right," Alex said.

"Oh, don't even. You were the one who planted the seed of doubt in his muddled and malleable mind," Edward threw out accusingly. Alex shifted uncomfortably and looked crestfallen. "Now, I never agreed with my imaginative brother here. I think this is something completely unrelated," Edward stated.

"Then what does it have to do with?" Harry asked. Edward took in a dramatic inhale of breath and—

"I haven't the foggiest," he said. Harry made a face of disbelief, and upon seeing that Edward ruffled his hair. "Stop worrying about it. It could just be a madman's political pamphlet, and you just happened to be an unlucky receiver of what, I'm sure, others have gotten as well," he said.

"That maybe true," Alex said. "Remember that one movement that happened three years ago? The—What was it called?—The..."

"Alliance of... or for... something... preserving-?" Edward stammered on, trying to help his brother unsuccessfully.

"Yeah! That's it!" Alex exclaimed as he snapped his fingers. "The Alliance for the Preservation and Protection of the Un-popularized Piast!" Alex said in one fast breath. Edward looked dumbfounded.

"Why do you remember stuff like that?" he asked evenly.

"Because, it's like you were saying," and Alex beamed over at Harry, "I remember it because Father kept getting all those ridiculous pamphlets that talked about the unfair bias the Piast receives and how the water monsters aren't as bad as they seem," Alex explained.

"Oh right! Right! And Father—whenever he got them—would ignite them on fire swearing to find every last one of them and show them how fierce a poor, misunderstood Piast could really behave," Edward snickered.

"I don't remember any of this..." Harry said quietly, trying to rack his brain.

"Whatever happened to that movement?" Edward asked. Alex smirked in a way that Harry thought was a bit darker than was possible for him.

"They held a demonstration at one of the lakes where a Piast lived," Alex said.

"And...?" Edward said, smiling, too.

"Oh.. well, as it turned out, Piast don't really like a lot of commotion and the strange flashing lights from all the cameras, and well... Let's

just say it's true what they say—that some people really are dedicated to their cause and are even willing to sacrifice a few things," he said.

"Whoo hoo! That's quite a dark streak you've got there, brother," Edward laughed. Harry stared at them in horror.

"You mean... You mean some people... died?" he asked, aghast.

"No, no, no!" Alex spluttered. "But one man did get swallowed whole. They actually had to sedate the beast and fish him out. He was sleeping in the Piast's gut when they found him," Alex explained quickly, seeing the shocked expression of Harry's. "He was okay—really!"

"Though I doubt he could ever look at fish the same way again," Edward snickered.

"Was you're dad—I mean, did he have anything to do—" Harry tried to ask, thinking about the remark Edward had made about Mr. Cole threatening to show the demonstrators the true wrath of the water beast.

"No. That was just coincidental," Edward said. "Although, I wouldn't put it past him..." Edward said.

"Stop that," Alex chided, and Edward threw up his hand in surrender.

"All in all, Harry," Edward said, "I wouldn't worry about that letter. Not just yet anyway." He smiled at him so genuinely that Harry had to concede to trust him.

And sure enough, they soon forgot all about the letter, the discreet paper safely within Harry's pocket. For the rest of their break, each of them tried to throw one another into the lake where, they proclaimed, was the biggest and meanest of all Piast. Only Edward was thrown in, though, once Harry and Alex had called for a truce between them while simultaneously forming the Piast-Need-Food-Too Alliance, and what better morsel than Edward they had decided.

Energized from the game (although Edward was equal parts energized, incensed, and sopping wet), the boys broke away after their break had ended and made their way to their classes, the letter far out of each of their minds.

Just as he had promised, and as soon as classes had ended for the day, Harry dropped his school things off onto his bed and made his way for Hagrid's. Harry ran along the path to Hagrid's, the small hut coming into view with a thin, coiling ribbon of smoke rising up from the tiny chimney. Reaching the door, Harry rapped three times. He heard Fang's booming bark, but no one else stirred inside. Strange, Harry thought as he tried to peer into the dusty window next to the door. Sure enough, there was the massive bloodhound licking at the window energetically, but no Hagrid. Harry stepped down and considered leaving a note when from around the back of the hut emerged Hagrid, dirty and scruffy.

"Oy, yeh silly mut," Hagrid said, tapping on the window that Fang was apparently trying to devour. "Cut it out! Hulloo there, 'arry!" Hagrid beamed, as he let the giant dog loose from the hut. It bounded over to Harry and jumped up on him. It took all the strength Harry had to keep standing and to balance the dog leaning on him with its two massive front paws.

"Hulloo, Hagrid," Harry replied, scratching the dog behind the ears. Hagrid whistled and the dog, to Harry's relief, climbed down from him and rushed over to his master.

"I see yeh came after all," Hagrid said, making his way back to the garden which wrapped around the backside of the hut.

"Of course," Harry said, a little offended. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Oh, I don' mean nuthin' by it. I just thought yeh be busy with Quidditch practice, is all," Hagrid apologized. Harry stopped.

"What did you-?" he asked deadpanned. Hagrid was just bending over to pull up some weeds when he noticed Harry had stopped speaking.

"Yeh alrigh' there Harry? Yer lookin' a bit peaky," Hagrid said worriedly. Harry swallowed.

"Quidditch practice, you said?" Hagrid nodded, his beard soiled with patches of dirt.

"Yeh, tha's right. Wasn't today the firs day for Slytherin Quidditch practice? The little blighters really took to the field. Gotta go and straigh'en up all the grass they kicked loose," Hagrid muttered. Harry suddenly felt really angry. Of all the dirty—!

He felt his fists ball up and his blood rile. Why— if he could— if he could, he'd show Malfoy how funny he thought his little trick really was. What did Harry ever do to that spoiled, pompous prat anyway? Was it really Harry's fault that he was obviously the better flier of the two? No.

This was such a low act! Harry would never have stooped to using such a sneaky trick, but it seemed like a rat like Malfoy wasn't above it. Now he'd be kicked off the team— Now he'll be ostracized further— Now he'll have to live with not only the stupid second years scowling at him, but some of the older years who were on the team, too! And after Edward had gone to the trouble... After Harry had sat through that ordeal with Snape—!

His head was pounding, and his skin felt so hot while his stomach felt as though it was winding and unwinding. His forehead was searing, but he paid it no heed. He was too angry at Malfoy for pulling such a stunt.

There came a pathetic whimpering sound, and Harry snapped to. Crouching behind Hagrid was Fang, shaking and with his tail between his legs.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hagrid asked, looking at him oddly. Harry focused onto the giant and realized with a horror that he had just been so close to having another magical outburst. Harry, disgusted with himself, couldn't find any words. He felt his face grow red with the shame and his eyes well up with tears of mortification.

"Did yeh miss it?" Hagrid guessed. Harry could only manage a slight nod. "I see..." Harry said nothing, but after a moment's silence, he looked up to see Hagrid aimlessly pulling weeds.

"D—do you need any help with that?" Harry asked timidly. He still felt rattled, not because of missing the Quidditch practice but because he almost blew up in front of someone as kind as Hagrid. If he ended up having someone like Hagrid spurn him, too—

Hagrid smiled up at him. "Yeh sure yeh want ter?"

Harry rub at his left eye, trying to discreetly wipe away the welled tears. "Yes. I'd like to. If you want me—"

"Then get over here. Can't pull any weeds up jus' thinkin' about it," Hagrid laughed. Harry hopped to. There wasn't really much to pull up, and he wasn't as fast as Hagrid who was yanking up the stubborn plants, removing roots and all. Harry had to move slower, sometimes confusing the thin vine protrusions of the pumpkins as weeds.

He was grateful to Hagrid for letting him stay and help. Otherwise, he'd be off confronting Malfoy, and who knew how disastrous that would turn into? Harry just needed to calm down and rethink things—reevaluate Malfoy. The boy was even more cunning than Harry had credited him for. And he was also a rotten coward. But as Harry ripped up a particularly rooted weed, he avowed to not show discouragement or defeat. Harry really needed to be more upfront. That was the way to combat the subterfuge of the Slytherins.

"Listen, Harry. I'm goin' teh go make some tea. Yeh'll have some, right?" came Hagrid's still worry-filled voice. Harry looked over to him and tried to give the gamekeeper a convincing smile.

"Yes, please. That would be great," he replied politely. Hagrid observed him for a second longer, his expressive, brown eyes peeking out from under the dirt-speckled brows.

"Be back in a minute then." He turned to leave but then stopped. "Uh, say, 'arry?" Hagrid leaned down and picked up a heavy looking watering can. "Would yeh mind too terribly to water these beauties while I brew the tea?"

"No! Not at all!" Harry complied, eager to help Hagrid in any way so as to make up for his near-outburst. Hagrid strode over to him and handed over the bucket. Harry was nearly pulled down upon receiving the canister.

"Thank yeh so much. Well, alright then!" With that Hagrid walked back into his hut, a crouched Fang following him in. Harry felt a wave of guilt overtake him. He must have really scarred Fang.

Hagrid was probably going into the hut just to get away from Harry, not that Harry blamed him.

He labored across the garden carefully and slowly, heaving the watering can up and tilting it to water the plants. He moved down the line, watering each sprouting pumpkin as much as he thought he needed to (though he was no expert at this and sometimes thought he gave one plant too little water and would have to trudge back just to give it more). He nearly had half the garden watered and still Hagrid had not returned.

His arms ached from carting the can around, and he had to stop to give his muscles a moment's reprieve. Wiping his brow clean of some of the sweat that beaded around his fringe, he leaned over to continue when a little green garden snake poked his head out from the gnarled pumpkin vines. Harry stilled his extending hand and felt the blood freeze in his very veins. The garden snake twisted its head and stared up at him with such intensity.

Merlin, he hated snakes.

Every time he saw one it reminded him of that one time with Dudley...

Slowly, Harry straightened and placing one trembling foot behind the other, he attempted to back away.

"Watch it."

Harry not registering the warning took another tentative step back and tripped over a pumpkin. He landed hard onto his back and smashed the pumpkin in the process. Covered in muck, yuck, and pumpkin string, Harry could only remain where he had fallen as the little garden snake slithered on up to him.

"I told you to watch it but did you listen to me? Now you got what you deserved you stupid boy." The snake stuck out its tongue, sniffing the veritable pumpkin guts strung about Harry and the garden floor. "Course stupid humans can't heed the clever snake's warning, can they? Always too busy stomping around with their heads up in the sky. Never any time to lean down and notice anything." The snake swiveled its scaly head back towards Harry.

"And look at this one. Covered in a mess and can't even figure out what to do about it."

Harry felt himself beginning to hyperventilate. This couldn't be real. Just couldn't. Just couldn't. Just couldn't—

"The giant one's not going to like this, is he?"

The snake was dangerously close to Harry's hand; Harry's fingers twitched in anxiety, his skin crawling from the close proximity to the reptile.

"Here I came thinking I had been called by someone, but no one's here. And quit watching me you stupid boy. Thinks I'm going to bite him. I don't want anything as nasty as a human in my mouth."

That's it. He's snapped. He's out of his mind. He's mad. All the pressures of Hogwarts, Snape, Death Eaters, Slytherins, magical outbursts, letdowns, conspiracies, pumpkins, unicorns, Fang, Coles, scars... Snakes...

Harry had finally snapped under all that weight.

"Oy! Pesky little thing! Get outta me garden!" came Hagrid's booming voice. The giant leaned down, picked up the little garden snake by the tail, and looked as though he was about to fling it off towards the Forbidden Forest.

"Put me down, you stupid troll!"

"No! Don't hurt him!"

Harry looked up, shocked. That had been his voice. Hagrid gazed down at a pumpkin covered Harry. "Don't—Don't hurt him," Harry repeated.

"What's this?"

"I wasn't goin' to hurt 'im! I was jus' gonna put 'im back where he belongs," Hagrid said.

"And where's that exactly?"

The little snake wriggled and coiled and slithered up Hagrid's hand as its tongue darted out continuously, flicking across the giant's wrist.

"Are yeh feelin' sick, Harry?" Hagrid asked leaning in close. The snake uncoiled from around Hagrid's hand and stretched its head out towards Harry. Its eyes were dark, so dark, and Harry couldn't look away. As the snake unwound further, Harry's stomach knotted tighter.

"Alright, now! I'll take care of it. Just don't look at it anymore," Hagrid said as he bounded away with the garden snake.

"Perhaps I'll see you around?"

Hagrid disappeared off in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. Harry's eyes were following the retreating figure of the giant, but they were glossed over—vacant. He stood, vaguely aware his body was moving, and soundlessly made his way back to Hogwarts. He'd apologize later to Hagrid for his rudeness—Mr. Cole had instilled better manners than that into him—but he couldn't stay here any longer.

The grass rustled quietly as he moved across the grounds. The sound triggered Harry's mind into a frenzy. That sound—a quiet shifting—a sound barely perceptible by people until it was too late—The creature laying in wait has already overtaken its target—

Snakes are vile.

Snakes are secretive, conniving creatures. They were the chosen familiars of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named... And they... they were why Harry was so hated by them. They were why... that thing happened.

His clothes were damp with the slime of the smashed pumpkin, and sweat had collected atop his forehead. His breathing had quickened into a dissonant pace, but what did he care?

"Where were you during practice?"

Harry glanced about him. He was already in the Slytherin common room—the snake pit.

"If you're going to be on the team, you need to show up for practice."

— disgusting.

"I made an exception for you because you had talent up there, but don't go thinking you're the exception for every rule. I'll excuse it just this once but don't make a habit of it."

—but that made Harry disgusting, too, didn't it?

"You hear me, Potter?"

Harry focused onto his lecturer. Marcus Flint was almost a foot taller than him.

"It's not going to happen again," Harry said evenly. Flint may not believe him, but isn't it the nature of solitary creatures to distrust others?

"Next practice is a week from now," the older student informed him. Harry inclined his head to show he had heard him and understood. Flint looked annoyed but didn't say anything else, so Harry took it as his dismissal. He'd keep his word. Not because he owed anything to Flint (or to any of the other team members, for that matter). He had promised Edward. They had promised to make their first match against one another unforgettable, and that was the important thing. Now more than ever.

Opening the door to the dormitory, Malfoy was there upon his bed perusing through a book unenthusiastically. Harry shut the door quietly, and Malfoy did not look up. Harry knew Malfoy was already aware of his presence, but Malfoy was playing a game, wasn't he? One that Harry, so far, had been at the disadvantage of. That was because Harry had misconceived his role in the house—in the school.

People like Malfoy were not superior to him because of their upbringing nor because of their heritage, but Harry had allowed them to think that they were all because he had wanted to keep his distance. Sometimes being passive could be a sign of weakness—of defeat. But hadn't Harry vowed to do something—something important? Something that, while none of the others in the House of

Slytherin could distinguish, separated him from them. A promise that made him untouchable.

His task scared him, made him nervous, made him question who he was as a person because why would he have been placed in such a house as this? But he realized then that that promise had made him impermeable because it affirmed a cause and on what side he stood.

But now...

People like Malfoy were not superior to him because of status and heritage.

They were superior because they were not him—were not Harry.

"Malfoy, did you know that the King Cobra almost exclusively eats its own species?" Malfoy didn't look up which was good for Harry. He was smiling as he spoke, but it wasn't an expression of confidence. The corners of his mouth twitched as he clenched his jaw in desperation. "It injects its venom, and when its prey has fallen, it devours it— sometimes while the prey is still alive."

Harry would have to play the game because who was he deceiving? He was just as conniving as the rest of them, but Harry would just have to use that to his advantage. He had made a promise, and after finding out what he now knew, he had to hold onto that promise. It would now be his only redeeming trait.

By the time Harry had felt Malfoy glancing up at him, he was already crawling into his own bed, pulling the drapes closed around him. Pulling his legs into him, Harry stared off blankly, wondering how he could amend this— now that he had discovered what a deplorable talent he had.

He felt himself smiling out of self loathing.

What would Mr. Cole think? What would Edward and Alex...

Harry squelched the cry that slipped up his throat—Malfoy was still present in the room, the quiet shuffling of pages sounding amidst the turmoil in Harry's head. What would those two think? His friends? His trusted friends? His surrogate brothers and truest of allies? What

would they do if they knew that Harry had something in common with some of the world's most nefarious wizards?

What would they think if they knew that he had the darkest of all talents?

Harry rolled unto his back and covered his eyes with his arm, trying to will the sadness away.

What kind of day would tomorrow be? Harry was certain that, for most of the students, it would be like any other day, but he would know that it wasn't. He would know that there was something different, something amiss...

...with him.

But no one must ever know. Not Mr. Cole— Not Mrs. Cole— Not Edward or Alex—Not any of the students or teachers and especially not any of the Slytherins.

Harry would squash his "talent." He'd once been able to do it do his magic—this was a form of magic. If he tried hard enough, like he had back then, then no one would ever come to know. And soon, it may even go away. Maybe he could repress it so deeply within him that even he'd be able to forget what lurked inside him. He could forget all about the little garden snake—

-the hissing words it made...

Harry would abolish the Parsletongue within him.

Well, that was odd, Draco thought to himself as he watched Harry close the curtains to his four-poster forcibly. There came sounds of rustling sheets from the Harry's bed, but nothing else. It was true that Harry was very reclusive, that's why Draco had been thinking that his tactics had had no effect. Harry had seemed unfazed with all that Draco had done meaning Draco had needed to alter his strategies.

But it seemed his latest orchestration, though nothing grand and all too simple, was a success.

Harry could be expressive, but that was only true when it came to his daft Gryffindor surrogates. When it didn't have anything to do with the Cole twins, Harry was unanimated.

But he had looked to be in a right state tonight.

Draco smirked, pleased with the outcome. He knew he was spoiled and was unaccustomed to not getting what he wanted, but he deserved that spot on the Quidditch team—and not as Chaser but as Seeker. Harry couldn't honestly think that he could obtain such a position through guile and not have it potentially taken from him through the same means? That would be ignorance at its apex.

Harry had been placed in Slytherin, and Draco had tried to take him under his influence because someone like Harry coming into the house caused more for concern than if it had been anyone else. It wasn't just because Harry was a child taken in by a prestigious (albeit heretic) family such as the Coles, which was more than unheard of—it never happened. It was also because everyone knew next to nothing about the boy, and to be placed in a house such as Slytherin...?

So Draco, excited at the prospect of unraveling the strangeness that was so far Harry Potter, had sought to include Harry in most of what he did. Besides, if Draco hadn't, no one else would have. And then after Draco had done all that, had extended such courteousness towards him, Harry had been made Seeker. Harry should have known better; Draco had talked about it enough times that Harry would have known better—did know better.

Was that a way to repay someone for their graciousness?

Draco didn't think so, and so he found it necessary to demonstrate to Harry just what his lack of presence could mean for the other. But then Harry (grudgingly admitted by Draco) was so infuriatingly unfazed by it. So Draco had tried something else, something that seemed, so far, more effective. If Harry's expression tonight was anything to go by, it was that Harry wasn't as impassive as he might have thought he was, and Draco would remember that.

Then Draco had a gleeful thought. He wouldn't yet abandoned his other tactic. Perhaps, if Draco let it drag out long enough, Harry would crack and may possibly even come running back to him,

apologizing for being so ungrateful, and then Draco may even forgive him because someone like Harry really couldn't know any better, what with being raised by first muggles and then the Coles. And then Draco would have all the time he wanted in order to figure out the mystery that was Harry.

There came a kind of pitiful sound from Harry's bed, and Draco smiled.

Soon Harry would learn his lesson, and Draco would be there to forgive him.

A/N: Thanks so much for reading!

Chapter 11: Harry Meets the Boy-Who-Lived

"Hey, what do you think is wrong with Harry?"

Edward looked up from his food and across the hall towards the Slytherin table. Harry was eating alone, but since lately, that wasn't unusual. Malfoy was being a petulant, little child and had commanded all the other stinking Slytherins to ignore Harry. What was cause for concern, though, was that Harry was looking progressively more and more pallid. He was just sitting there, head bent over the now surely cooled porridge, not eating.

Edward frowned.

"I don't know, but something has happened," Edward said quietly to his brother. Alex looked, if possible, even more worried, and stared at Harry fixedly as if willing him to feel better or to eat.

"Do you think he got another letter?" Alex said after a moment.

"From Father?"

"No, I think he'd tell us. I meant one from that... Osiris person."

"No... because he would want us to help check it for jinxes and stuff," Edward replied.

"Then... maybe it is a letter from Father? Maybe he said something to offend Harry—cause him doubt," Alex surmised. Edward curled his lip.

"And how's that different from any other occasion? Harry has thick skin, after all. Or he used to..." Edward trailed off.

"Then... Then I really don't like this. I know Harry's... tough and all, so that means that whatever's bothering him can't be anything good," Alex whispered. Fred and George walked by, and both Edward and Alex nodded to them. "It's not good, is it?" Alex reiterated.

Damn it... Edward thought. He needed to get to the bottom of this. A month of Hogwarts had reduced Harry to keeping secrets from his family? What else would happen once the school year went on?

"Don't worry, brother. We'll help him," he said determinedly. "We'll get him after his Quidditch practice." Alex nodded, but instead of eating his own breakfast, he went back to watching Harry, his brows furrowed and jaw fixed. Edward inwardly sighed.

Without looking at him, he reached up to the back of Alex's head, and pushed down on it towards his brother's untouched food.

"Wha— Cut it out Edward," Alex said, resisting.

"Eat," he said, spooning a sizable amount of porridge into his own mouth. Normally, he'd be eating something like bacon or sausage with eggs, but—and he didn't want to admit this to his brother—he wasn't feeling very hungry either, though he knew he had to at least eat something. Porridge, wonders of all wonders, just happened to be the only thing he could think of.

Alex, who normally would protest, wordlessly picked up his spoon and helped himself to his own bowl of bland, colorless porridge. Edward smiled because though Alex was eating, he didn't look away from Harry. He ruffled his brother's hair fondly. Alex waved his hand at him passively, not paying him much heed.

"You guys are always together."

Edward looked up as Ron sat across from him and his brother, greeting the twins with a tired yawn. Neville came ambling up behind, plopping down tiredly next to the red head while Seamus sat to Edward's side and Dean next to Alex's. They each settled into their seats and helped themselves to some breakfast.

"Well, this poor pup here can't do anything without me sadly," Edward said. "Oh look, you got a little porridge all over that adorable face of yours," he said, picking up a napkin and trying to get at Alex's face.

"Would you stop that," Alex chided, pushing Edward away and into Seamus who was laughing.

"That's right, brother. Put on your brave-face," and tilting his head to speak to Seamus he whispered, "I'm teaching him some independence." Alex went red in the face.

"Must you always take a passive comment and twist it into a huge ordeal?" his brother said.

"Sorry. I was only saying that you guys are close—like Fred and George, you know?" Ron tried to apologize.

"I didn't know that I was taking anything out of context," Edward said to Alex, feigning ignorance. His twin rolled his eyes while Ron smiled sheepishly and mumbled a few more apologies to Alex. Alex shook his head at him and told him it wasn't his fault but his git of a brother's. At that, Edward turned to Seamus.

"Then again, give 'em a little independence and look how snarky they get," he observed as he clicked his tongue sternly at his twin.

"Merlin..." Alex sighed exasperatedly.

"I wish I had siblings," Neville said softly. Edward looked over at him. "You know... to have someone to talk to."

Wow... Edward thought as Neville went red in the face. Being someone like Neville—someone so famous and admired... To want such a thing... Not knowing why, he thought of Harry, Harry who was alone and isolated over at the Slytherin table.

"Trust me, Neville. It isn't as good as it sounds," Ron said.

"I second that," Alex said evenly. Edward flicked his brother in the nose for such an awful comment. "See what I mean?" Alex said, rubbing his nose. Neville smiled meekly.

"I dunno... seems... kind of great to me," he said quietly.

"Well, I have five older brothers, and it isn't all that fantastic. You have to share all your things and I—because I'm the youngest of the boys—all I ever get is beat-up, old hand-me-downs. And then I've got loads to live up to because of how well all my brothers did in school," Ron admitted, abashed. "Really, I could do without a few of 'em," he added.

"Ron, that's a terrible thing to say," Neville cried.

"I don't mean I want them gone... for good. Merlin, Neville. I just want Percy, Fred, and George out of the house," Ron clarified. "That's all I meant." Neville still looked upset. To him, Edward thought, saying someone wanted their family members out of the house was almost as bad as saying they didn't want them at all.

"Well, I don't have any siblings, so I wouldn't know what it's like either," said Dean Thomas. Edward hadn't really gotten to know Dean yet. He mainly kept to himself, and when he wasn't with Seamus he was off drawing or something.

"Same here. Me dad didn't want anymore wizards runnin' around the house. Mum's always complainin' about it, too, but to tell you the truth, I'm not so sure I'd want o' bunch of brothers and sisters," Seamus said.

"It's really not so bad," Alex said quietly. Edward felt a little embarrassed, but he knew it meant both him and Harry. To think Alex was so happy to have a great brother like Edward... Were those tears he felt in his eyes? "What are you grinning about?" Alex asked, looking at him partly concerned and partly amused. Edward wiped away his pretend tears and sighed.

"Oh... it's nothing," he sniffed. "Here I am... so admired by my younger brother."

"You are not that much older," Alex corrected. "And if maturity counts for anything, I've got way more years on you," he added with a smirk.

"Then isn't a shame maturity counts for nothing?" Edward retorted.

"See? That's what I mean," Neville said excitedly, watching the twins as if he liked nothing more than to get into a meaningless argument. Both Edward and Alex smiled, embarrassed at having the Boy-Who-Lived admire them.

"That's kind of how Fred and George act," Ron commented. "But it's just them two..." he said, and Edward thought he sounded a little jealous. Maybe the problem wasn't that Ron had too many older brothers. Maybe it was just that he didn't have one he could be close with. Edward suddenly felt so grateful for having Alex and Harry.

"It's not just a twin thing," Edward said to Ron. Ron shrugged his shoulders like he didn't care what it was.

"That's right. Harry keeps up with us," Alex said proudly.

Seamus and Ron made hollow 'oh, is that so?' expressions while Dean looked unconcerned entirely. The others, it occurred to Edward, didn't care what his and Alex's Slytherin brother did.

"He doesn't find it difficult, you know, with you guys being twins and all?" Neville earnestly asked. Good ol' Neville. A champion among lions, it seemed.

"Well, when he first came to live with us, he kept his distance," Alex explained.

"Only because he thought we wouldn't like him," Edward added.

"But after awhile, he really became a third brother," Alex said, smiling broadly.

"A third twin, perhaps?" Edward asked, looking to his brother.

"We'd be triplets then," Alex replied.

"That's my point, Alex. Honestly, why do you try to correct things that don't need correcting?" Edward asked dramatically.

"There is no point with you..." Alex said passively.

"Why hasn't the Slytherin been visiting you guys lately?" Seamus asked, a bit too snidely for Edward's liking. Seamus was an okay guy, but Edward didn't like the way he would refer to Harry sometimes. Then again, he didn't like it when anyone did it.

"His name is Harry," Alex said darkly before Edward could correct Seamus himself, and he felt himself swell with pride at his brother. Seamus tensed abashedly and muttered that he knew that. "And maybe he hasn't been visiting lately because some of the Gryffindors aren't as gracious as they claim to be," he added. He had taught his brother well!

"I don't have a problem with 'im!" Seamus shouted defensively. "But he never says anythin' to me! What am I supposed to think?" he asked, getting red in the face.

"That he's shy?" Alex said. Seamus made a humph sound. The others were eating their breakfast quietly, not wanting to get into the middle of it.

"I think he seems nice," Neville said, trying to help, though the way Seamus started glairing at him, one would think he thought Neville had betrayed him.

"Thanks Neville," Alex said, smiling widely. "He is!"

All this talk of Harry only made Edward more antsy to find out what was truly bothering his friend. He looked over at the Slytherin table, but Harry wasn't there. Edward thought that was strange because he could normally detect when Harry was on the move, even when he wasn't paying explicit attention. Besides, Harry normally stayed in the Great Hall until it was time for class. He scanned the entire table and didn't see him at all. He nudged his brother. Alex, knowing Edward well enough, looked straight over at the Slytherin table without missing a beat. Once he couldn't locate Harry either, he looked at Edward questioningly. Edward shrugged his shoulders.

"You guys just had a whole conversation, didn't you?" Neville asked, admiringly.

"Also what Fred and George do... all the time," Ron muttered. Alex went on to tell Neville that when he and Edward had been younger they had invented their own language. Neville looked mystified and hung on to Alex's every word. Dean and Ron listened attentively, too, while Seamus sulked next to Edward. Edward only half listened to his brother's story, though, while the rest of him thought about Harry.

After Quidditch practice, Edward thought, staring at the space Harry had vacated, that's when I'll talk to him. He can't keep hiding things. It's not good. Not for him and not for me.

"—remember, Edward?"

"Yeah... and Father grounded us for two whole weeks," Edward chimed in instinctually.

"I had forgotten about that part. Well, anyways... afterwards..."

Edward tuned back out and thought about all the possibilities as to why Harry was looking more and more grim, and concluded that not any of them were good. Anything that caused Harry discomfort was not okay by Edward. Guess he'd just have to wait until after Harry's Quidditch practice to figure it all out. He just hoped Harry would be receptive.

Harry was hesitant to go outside, what with all that had happened a couple of weeks ago, but knew he could not miss another Quidditch practice. So it was with the greatest sense of reluctance that he made his way across the field and to the locker rooms. This would be the team's fourth practice, his third. Harry was amazed at how many practices Flint had managed to schedule so early on in the season.

He walked briskly, not stopping to analyze any of the rustling sounds he heard, chalking them all up to be nothing but the wind's doing. Entering the changing rooms, a bit breathlessly, he found he was the first one there. That was just perfect for him.

He changed into his robes quickly, not stalling, just in case the other team members came in. He didn't feel like talking to them nor to be lectured by any of them, especially by Flint. Harry had received earfuls of reprimands by the older team members, but Flint was by far the worst. Probably because he was captain, or maybe because he just didn't like Harry. Either way, Harry was tired of it. He was just lacing up his boots when Malfoy came sauntering in, chatting to a bored looking older year by the name of Adrian Pucey, another Chaser on the team. Harry didn't stop to acknowledge Malfoy; he just grabbed his recently polished broom and left.

The field was freshly cut—Harry didn't know if it was by magical or manual means— and it was probably the last cut it would need until the warmer weather came back. He had figured that Flint would already be on the field, but Harry was again the first. He thought about getting a head start and flying but didn't think he'd be so keen to stop and come down once Flint made an appearance, so instead, he waited by sitting on one of the benches that sat along the stands of the field.

As he waited, he watched the rest of the team members enter the changing rooms one after another. Flint had been the last to arrive. He waited and waited, and then he heard the grass shuffle behind and tensed drastically. His heart quickened as he slowly turned around, expecting the worst. Since leaving Hagrid's that one day, Harry hadn't been successful at squelching his talent. Try as he might, it was too fresh and too horrible to forget.

He turned his head, held his breath, and looked. Then he sighed, relieved to find the shuffling was only his Quidditch robes billowing in the wind and against the grass.

"Hey! Potter! Get your arse over here!" shouted Flint from the center of the field. Gathering his broom, Harry ambled on towards the rest of the team who had gathered around Flint in a semi-circle. "Alright, now that everyone's here, let's talk about strategy. The first match is the Huffle-duffers versus the Gryffin-gits..."—the team started snickering at Flint's wordplay, but Harry fancied Flint had spent many a good hours coming up with it and didn't find it funny at all—"... then after that it's us versus Ravenclaw. The nerds aren't much for flying, but they've got a couple of good Chasers this year, so we can't slack off.

"Now, I've come up with a few good plays here that we need to try out. The last one we worked on was pathetic. I had to dismiss it. Pucey and Malfoy—You two are pretty fast up there so here's what I want you guys to concentrate on..."

Harry slipped out of attentiveness and stared at his boots during the remaining bit of the speech. His job was easy— look out for the flying, golden ball and catch it. Simple as far as strategizing went. Flint never gave Harry any pointers besides "keep focused" and "be quick."

"Okay, let's get up there!" Flint called. Harry imagined Flint as one of those captains that would have a war-song to sing at the beginning of each match. Harry hoped he wasn't though. That would be grossly annoying. Mirroring the other team members, Harry threw a leg over his broom and kicked off. Flint, still on the ground, released the magicked balls.

Harry took his position up above the rest of the fliers. The snitch was released last, and though it moved at speeds much quicker than that

of the quaffle and bludgers, Harry was still able to watch it rise from the case and into the air. Harry had the amusing idea of trying to have the quickest Quidditch match ever. All he'd need to do is be low enough that once the snitch was released, and before it shot off to someplace random and while he had his eye on it, simply catch it. Just like that. He could end the game in under ten seconds.

But that would make for a lot of irritated spectators and infuriated team members, if such a thing were allowed. Harry circled above lazily. Technically, he could go after the snitch as many times as he wanted— his capture of it wouldn't end the practice session— but he got a little caught up in watching the other team members. As he watched the others whiz around on their brooms, he had to admit that the Slytherin team was pretty good.

Flint was as aggressive as a Beater as he was the captain, and Harry didn't want to be on the receiving end of a bludger attack from him. The other beater, Derrick Bole, was less ferocious, but he was quick, able to intercept a bludger's trajectory and hurl it back with alarming accuracy. The Keeper, Edwin Vaisey, was a very solemn looking fourth year whom Harry had never spoken a word to nor heard anything spoken from him, but he was attentive and diligent in his guarding of the goalposts.

Terrence Higgs, who had been Seeker last year and replaced, much to Higgs' displeasure, by Harry, seemed too preoccupied with either glaring at Harry or trying to locate the snitch faster than him to be of any asset as a Chaser. Flint had noticed that and had pulled Higgs aside one practice session to tell him that if he had a problem with the new lineup to take it up with Professor Snape. As far as Harry knew, Higgs has made no such attempt, but that still didn't hinder the sixth year from sneaking in a malicious glance or two, nor from cutting Harry off in mid-pursuit of the snitch and causing near falloffs from his broom. He even managed to leave Harry with a few bruises after "accidentally" crashing into him on occasion. Higgs would feign innocence and claim he had only been trying to get in the path of the quaffle, but Harry noticed that the quaffle had never been anywhere near Higgs at those times.

Malfoy was difficult to completely judge because most of the time he stayed away from the quaffle, flying instead, as far as Harry could gather, around the pitch with no discernable purpose. It was like Malfoy was merely sharing the field with the Slytherin team, but he

wasn't a part of it. There were very few times when Harry saw Malfoy actually handling the Quaffle. When he did, though, he wasn't bad. He caught the ball effortlessly and threw it with just as much ease. But it was always to Adrian. Never did he try to aim it at the goalposts.

So the team wasn't bad. Of course, having new, shiny brooms didn't hurt matters either. Malfoy one morning, just before the team had taken off, presented six gleaming, black-polished brooms all displaying their Nimbus titular upgrade: Two Thousand and Two, "generously given"—as Malfoy had put it—by his father. Malfoy had claimed that since Harry had a Nimbus Two Thousand and One, his father needn't provide a broom for him. Not that Harry would have accepted it anyway; he was too fond of his broom, which Edward and Alex had given to him. It was just the haughtiness with which Malfoy had spoken that had made Harry want to snap Malfoy's new broom in two.

Having such a blatant advantage was something Harry couldn't grumble about too much, though, because it wasn't as if his own broom didn't far outrank those of the other teams, many of the players using the school brooms which were of the old Cleansweep series. If Harry wanted to speak of true fairness he'd have to relinquish his broom, and he didn't want to, at all. He was very fond of his broom. So if Malfoy wanted to use his father's wealth to advance the team, Harry just had to shut his mouth and go with it.

Besides, and it may be treacherous to think, but he was positive that the Gryffindor team wouldn't be so easily beaten (Harry had scouted out a couple of the team's practices, by the invites of Edward and through the acceptance of Wood). Then again, Flint must acknowledge that as well or else he wouldn't have had them up so early on the weekends nor up so late during the weekdays to practice.

Feeling he should start to actively participate, Harry set off to find the snitch.

Edward snuck around the backside of the stands, out of the watchful eye of the big, ugly Slytherin captain. Edward had once tried to watch a Slytherin practice session just cause he liked watching Harry fly about, but Flint had noticed him and had started shrieking like a banshee. Edward felt he could take the Slytherin on at any

time of the day, but the older year was far too annoying for Edward to stick around long enough to do so. So now Edward was forced to watch in secret.

This time, though, he wasn't there just to watch.

He peeked around the edge of the stands just in time to find the team had landed and was making their way back to the changing room, and Edward had stalked enough of the Slytherins' practice sessions to know that Harry always delayed himself so that he wouldn't have to change with the rest of the members of his team. It was this trait of Harry's that made it an opportunity for Edward.

Walking out from around the stand, he met up with Harry just as the other descended to the ground.

"Hullo, Edward," Harry said politely. Edward frowned. Oh yeah, there was definitely something awry.

"And hullo to you too, kind sir," Edward replied sarcastically. Harry rolled his eyes as he landed fully and shifted the broom out from under him. "Well, you looked good up there, but I can't say the same thing for the rest of the team. Think you can single handedly carry your deficient team unto glory?" Edward asked, putting his hands into his pockets. Harry blinked up at him, but instead of his usual sarcastic retort, Edward got:

"Do you need something?" To make matters worse, Harry had asked him earnestly like it couldn't be that Edward just wanted to hang out with his friend or anything. No. Edward needed something.

He had thought that he would slowly ease into his intent, but not anymore.

"Alright, Harry. Let's have it out." Harry stared at him stupidly.

"Have what out?"

"This!" Edward said, gesturing to Harry by waving his hand up and down. "Whatever's causing this—let's have it out!" Harry sighed tiredly.

"Edward, I don't know what you're talking about." Edward felt his jaw tighten. There were very few times Edward got annoyed with Harry, and even less where he actually got angry with him. But there was never a time when Edward had been disappointed with Harry. Now, that's all Edward felt.

"You trust us so little then?" Edward asked, referring to not just himself but his brother, too. Harry bit his bottom lip, a sure sign of trouble and guilt.

"You know that's not true. Why would you say something so stupid," Harry spat.

"The only one being stupid is you. You don't think that me and Alex haven't noticed?" And at that Harry tensed. "We're your friends—You're brothers, Harry."

"It's not what you think," Harry said softly.

"No, maybe it's not what you think. Whatever it is, you should know that can tell us—you have to tell us. Otherwise..." Edward felt himself getting really emotional, which is utterly embarrassing to say the least. He swallowed the emotions down. "Otherwise, who do you have left?" he asked evenly. Harry looked up at him, wide-eyed. Edward knew that was a low tactic for him to use, but he also knew how effective it'd be on Harry.

"Just tell me what's bothering you," Edward tried. Harry looked away and clenched his hands. "Did you get...I dunno—another letter from Osiris?"

"Who?"

"You know... Osiris."

"Oh... I'd forgotten about that..."

"Well, then did you get a letter from Father? Alex seems to think so," Edward said. Harry shook his head.

"No. I haven't received any letters from him in a month," Harry replied. Merlin! What was Edward supposed to do. Get on his knees and beg?

"Come on, Harry. Give me something to go on," Edward said, rubbing at the corner of his right eye tiredly.

"Listen, I can't tell you..." Harry began and Edward rolled his eyes, "... right now. It's not that I don't want to—It's not even that big of a deal—But my head's all muddled..." Harry looked like he was practically in pain. Edward stepped closer instinctually, but Harry waved his hand for him to stay put. "You know I'll tell you and Alex eventually," Harry said with a forced smile that Edward wanted to smack away. It was only with a heavy sigh—the heaviest of heavy sighs—that Edward conceded to back off... for now.

"Just as long as you tell us eventually," he said, and Harry gave a small smile of gratitude. For that, Edward scowled. Being so easily manipulated by his friend... "Merlin, You're difficult," he exhaled tiredly as he ruffled Harry's hair.

"Well, I better get going," Harry uttered quietly. Edward felt like protesting that— felt like telling Harry that he should forget the other Slytherins and come bunk up with him and Alex, but he didn't. Harry looked much too tired, and as much as Edward didn't want to acknowledge it, if Harry was around him and Alex it was likely he'd be forcing a continual façade. That was something that Edward did not want to burden Harry with. So...

"Sure... See ya," he said, at last, rubbing the back of his neck. But just as Harry turned around to leave, Edward grabbed him by the back of his collar and yanked him back.

"Wha-?"

"Come and stop by. You haven't lately... and you know you can," Edward said. He wouldn't force Harry to come with him this time, but he'd make it damn clear that Harry could still come whenever he wanted. "Alex misses it... I... I do, too." Harry was silent for a moment, but Edward was sure he heard a gulp.

"Yeah... I know... I will."

"Alright, then... Off you go!" Edward said, shoving his friend forward. Harry looked at him worriedly which baffled Edward. He should worry about himself, he thought. And I should worry about him, too.

Not the other way around. But he knew that that was something Harry did to divert others from fretting about him. Normally, it worked, but not this time. If Alex could be an annoying, clucking mother hen, then, by merlin, so could Edward. He smiled assuredly at his friend.

Don't worry, Harry, Edward thought as he waved his friend another goodbye, I'm going to watch your back constantly. That way, I don't have to be in the dark, and you don't have to feel so alone. As Harry disappeared into the changing rooms, Edward bit his lower lip. He'd have to tell Alex that his plan had been a bust; he wasn't looking forward to the shrieking fest that would ensue, but oh well! Harry was a bigger issue than his brother's screeching.

Harry slammed the last of the books he was willing to look through that night with such a clamorous thud that most of the surrounding students glared over at him. He muttered some apologies and then, when the students had looked away, shoved the many tomes down the table and away from him. He wasn't getting anywhere with his investigation.

Laying his head down upon the glossy, wooden table, he closed his eyes tiredly. Tonight, he had searched through ten books, some of them more than a thousand pages in length. But no matter the effort he put into the search, it was looking more and more futile. The only books that would probably have anything mentioning Parsletongue would be in the Restricted Section of the library, but in order to look through those, he'd need a professor's consent. There was no way he was getting that kind of permission. He could lie about a reason, but the teachers at Hogwarts would probably attend the library with a second year like Harry just to make sure he'd get the right book he lied about needing. And then, if Harry ever did brazenly tell a professor about the true reason, he'd be expelled, shipped off, and sent to someplace like Azkaban. Bloody Fantastic...

Harry had tried to just forget about the ability, but that was proving to be just as ineffective as his research was. He still didn't know how he was going to explain it to anyone, especially Edward and Alex... If he ever would, that is. He sighed miserably and burrowed his face into his folded arms.

Edward was onto him, though.

Harry was grateful that he had someone who cared enough about him to be so worried for him, but that worry sometimes caused him more strife than he wanted. Merlin! He'd almost blabbed about it to Edward—his friend could be so persistent.

"Are you going to be using this table for much longer?" asked an annoying, high-strung voice. Harry looked up to find a crowd of Ravenclaws hovering around him. The boy who had asked him was a second year that Harry recognized from his Defense class. He was annoying there, too.

"No, I'm done now," Harry said, deciding he really should abandon his search for this evening. Just as Harry pushed back his chair to get up, the majority of the Ravenclaws were already sitting down and pouring through their books, all except one who was, apparently, waiting for Harry's seat. Retrieving his books, he left the Ravenclaws to their studying, placed the books back where he'd gotten them from, and left.

At this time of night, much of the halls were empty, everyone either in the library or back in their houses. Harry ambled through one such vacant hall when he thought he heard something. He stopped, tilted his head curiously, but after a moment of intense listening, heard nothing more. He shrugged it off and continued on, but just as he reached the grand moving staircase, he heard it again. He turned around with his wand out. He didn't know why he did, but something told him that he should.

He walked forward tentatively. As he walked, there came a strange hissing sound, barely audible but still loud enough for Harry to hear. He passed a empty classroom, was about to walk on, when he noticed the hissing sound became dimmer the further he went on. He backtracked.

The door to the room was slightly ajar. Carefully, Harry pushed it open just far enough for him to peek in. He searched the room until something caught his eye. He opened the door fully and stepped in. In the center of the floor was a bunch of dampened rags. Such a thing wouldn't have normally peaked Harry's curiosity, but these rags were stained a dark red and... burning. Harry leaned down to get a closer look. Thin tendrils of smoke were billowing up as the rags shrank in on themselves, hissing out in protest as they disintegrated.

He prodded the rags with his wand, lifted one up with it, and then sniffed it.

I thought so, Harry sighed, discarding the rag back onto the pile. It's dissolving solution. But why would it be here? And why was someone trying to dissolve a bunch of rags? The whole thing seemed rather strange to him. Normally, dissolving solution was hard to come by, and he was sure only someone like the Potions Master would have it in stock. The only reason to use the solution would be to erode the hard, outer exteriors of some of the ingredients used in potions, things like horns that, for the most part, are virtually indestructible. So was someone trying to dissolve a horn?

Just as Harry extended his wand to do some more probing, his wand was snatched up. Harry got to his feet and snapped his head up. His wand was dangling above, just out of jumping reach.

"Give me my wand back," Harry said darkly. He had a good guess about who the thief was. "I know you're there, Peeves. You aren't supposed to mess with the students, especially their wands," Harry said staring up.

"What's the Potty-brat doing here?" the fat ghost asked, materializing into a more visible form.

"Could ask the same thing of you," Harry bit back. He had had enough encounters with Peeves to make him immune to the ghost's antics— not that Harry didn't avoid him when it was possible though.

"Ooh! Chilly, wittle Potty! I could tell on you, you know, before you could on me," Peeves cackled.

"So this is your doing?"

"No, no, no! Not Peeves! Not Peeves! But I know who is was!" the ghost laughed as it circled above, Harry's wand still captive.

"Then who was it?" Harry asked, despite himself. Peeves lowered until he was level with Harry.

"It was... You!" And with that, the poltergeist sunk beneath the floor, Harry's wand, unable to move through like the ghost, clattered onto the floor. Picking it up, Harry made for the stairs. That's all he needed—to have Peeves rat on him when he had done nothing! But maybe he could get to the ghost first, bribe him. Harry had seen some of the older students do it. Normally, all someone had to do was give him something. Harry didn't have anything on him, but he'd find a way to work that kink out.

He skipped steps at a time, and it was when he reached the third floor that he heard something strange again. He tore down the third floor corridor, searching for the ghost. Peeves was nowhere in sight. Harry wondered if he should be looking in the classrooms when he heard a voice. He slowed down and then stopped completely. The sound... whatever it was... it couldn't be Peeves... Could it? He strained his ears, but it was thin and far away. Then there was silence. Harry looked about him frantically. If it really was Peeves, playing some prank on him—! The wispy voice sounded again, and Harry began to walk in the direction he suspected it was coming from.

"... so hungry.."

Harry stopped once more. That, Harry thought, flexing his fingers around his wand reflexively, is definitely not Peeves. It was such a cold voice— a voice unlike anything he had ever heard.

"... so hungry... for so long now..."

The voice was moving, but it sounded like it was coming from in the walls. Harry stilled. That couldn't be right; he knew about all the ghosts that wandered Hogwarts halls, and he knew that none of them abided within the walls. He pushed his ear up against the stone. It was repeating the same thing over and over again, only it was growing fainter. Harry moved down the corridor, clinging to the wall, listening, but as he turned a corner, there came a gasp, a loud crack, and a cloud of smoke.

Reflexively, Harry intoned a spell to blow most of the smoke away, readying himself for another confrontation with Peeves. However, to his surprise, coughing on the other side was Neville Longbottom. Harry blinked a few times in confusion, but then quickly concealed his wand and ran up to the boy to ask if he was alright.

"I'm fine," Neville hacked as he waved his hands about to dissipate the remaining smoke.

"You sure? What was that?" Harry asked as he helped Neville clear the lingering cloud.

"Oh, um... I, well—I always s-sort of..." but Neville trailed off looking frazzled. "I'm not so good at magic sometimes, is all. M-my lumos... I guess it backfired..." Neville said quietly, his voice drifting off.

"Was someone else here?" Harry asked, looking around. He didn't think that the voice he had heard was Neville's. No, he knew it wasn't Neville's. At Harry's question, though, the boy looked even more worried.

"N-no! Just me. I was heading back to the common room wh-when this... happened," he said earnestly, though why he looked so startled was beyond Harry. Neville continued to brandish the smoke away, his cheeks flushed, and once that task had been completed, he looked to Harry eagerly. "You're Harry, right?" he asked. Harry nodded, and Neville smiled sheepishly. "I knew that—sorry to ask. Edward and Alex talk about you a lot, and I wanted to meet you." Then it was Harry's turn to go red in the face.

"S-sorry! My gran always tells me not to be so pur-presumptuous. But I just thought that if Edward and Alex are so kind that the brother they admire so much must be, too." At this rate, Harry thought his face would turn into a tomato. He had never been told something so nice before in all his life outside of the Coles. This was the Boy-Who-Lived! A hero to the wizarding world, and here he was complimenting someone so undeserving like Harry. He was at a complete loss for words. Luckily, Neville's stomach growled. Then not knowing what to say or do, the two of them started laughing.

"I guess you're hungry," Harry said.

"Yeah, I didn't eat too much tonight. Colin Creevey kept asking me questions, and I didn't know what to say half the time. My gran always tells me I don't pay enough attention to people sometimes," Neville smiled wanly. "But sometimes I think... I feel that they just pay too much attention to m—me." Harry stared at Neville in amazement. Edward had mentioned how humble the Boy-Who-

Lived was, but Harry still found it... He didn't know what word to use. Astounding? Shocking? Refreshing? Harry shook his head and thought about the Creevey kid that Neville had mentioned.

"I've been noticing that kid," Harry said. "Is he a fan?" Harry regretted saying that as soon as it passed his lips because at the mention of fan Neville looked crestfallen. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean anything by it!" Harry apologized frantically.

"It's alright. It's... it's kind of... People just see the scar and get a little... excited," Neville replied as he shifted uncomfortably. As he did, the collar of his shirt was pulled away from his neck, and Harry could see the infamous mark so clearly himself. A hook. A claw, it seemed. To Neville, it must be a constant reminder of that horrible night, and there Harry had been so thoughtless as to mention fans!

"Professor Lockhart tells me to embrace it," Neville said quietly.

"What does he know? Bet you a thousand galleons he has never even seen a banshee let alone fought one," Harry grinned. At that, Neville, too, grinned.

"You wanna go to the kitchens? Fred and George showed it to me last year. They always have left over food," Neville offered. Harry thought about saying no, but the second his stomach growled both the boys knew that to the kitchens was exactly where they wanted to go. Along the way, they talked about Potions and Professor Snape, and Harry found, to his mirth, that Neville, too, wasn't all that fond of the teacher.

"Last year, he made me scrub all the cauldrons all because I forgot to add one ingredient," Neville was saying as they landed on the first floor. "It took me three hours, and afterwards, he had looked so disapproving that I thought he was going to ask me to clean them again." Neville shuddered. "It was horrible." Harry laughed despite himself, feeling he wouldn't have been able to react any better than Neville if it had been him instead.

"I feel like I can't do anything right in that class," Harry admitted ruefully.

"Professor Snape just has that effect. Even Hermione, who's best in class, is never praised. I think she still gets full marks, but Professor Snape could at least... I don't know..."

"Acknowledge it?" Harry asked.

"Yeah." Harry nodded his head in agreement. Talking about Snape was leaving Harry with a sour taste in his mouth. Luckily, Neville changed the subject to Herbology.

"That's about the only thing I'm really any good at," Neville said, brightening somewhat. "Although, the mandrakes don't seem to like me too much."

"I don't think they like anyone," Harry said.

Professor Sprout had been having the students grow mandrakes, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that raising and nurturing the mystical plants was going to be a yearlong project. The thought made Harry groan inwardly. The plants were like ugly, squirming, shrieking babies, only they were plants with greenish skin and leaves for hair and far more annoying than infants. Not to mention that during every class, it was required for them to wear earmuffs, for the cry of the mandrake was so fatal, if anyone was to hear it fully, that would be the end of things.

Neville seemed to really like it, though, and Harry was more than happy to talk about the things if it made Neville happy. Once they reached the kitchen and after all the house elves had been so gracious to give them food, Harry had forgotten all about asking Neville about the strange voice he had heard earlier.

And later that night, after he and Neville had departed, and after Harry had made his way back to a quiet and slumbering dormitory, he fell asleep rather quickly, tired from the day. Even so, some good came of it. He had met Neville Longbottom, and at least he didn't seem to dislike Harry.

After awhile, he dreamt. There he was walking through the Forbidden Forest when out of the trees came a magnificent unicorn. It was so lovely that he couldn't help but want to touch it. As he reached out to it though, it reared up, kicking its front legs up at him. Harry backed away, scarred, and then tripped on a fallen branch. He

landed hard, and when he looked up the unicorn was gone. Instead, Fang was there, barking at him madly. Harry tried to calm the dog down but every time Harry made to get nearer, the dog whimpered.

'I don't think he likes you very much.' Harry looked over and poking out of his shirt was the little garden snake.

'Get off of me!' Harry cried as he tried to throw the snake off of him, but as his fingers clasped around the scaly form of the serpent, the snake slithered around his throat and wound itself tighter and tighter around his neck. Loosing breath and feeling faint, Harry sunk to his knees. Fang was still barking off a ways, but Harry couldn't hear him clearly. There was an awful ringing in his ears. The ringing got louder and louder until it made Harry want to scream out.

'...hungry... come to me... let me... rip you...'

Harry opened one eye blearily, but nothing was around him. The pressure at his throat had alleviated, and the ringing in his ears had stopped. Then darkness overtook him, swallowed him up, and surrounded him. And in the darkness, a shrill voice spoke.

'...let me rip you... let me kill you...'

When Harry awoke the next morning, the sky outside was still an inky blue. He was coated in a thin layer of sweat, but try as he might, nothing of the dream could he recall. The only thing he sensed was a tightness in his chest and a tension that lasted all through his day.

A/N: Well... sure has been awhile... Please review!

Chapter 12: Outburst

Harry walked into the Dining Hall one pale morning to find the students remarkably excitable for so early in the day. Generally, the hall was quiet, everyone laboring themselves to wake up while they steamed their faces over piping bowls of porridge and hot cereal. That morning, however, everyone's lips were moving quickly, their eyes all lit up, their hands miming animatedly through the air.

Harry moved curiously down the tables, observing the oddity of the Great Hall's occupants. Taking a seat at a relatively empty end of the Slytherin table, he grab his own bowl of breakfast porridge, and stared about him. He tried to listen in on the conversation a couple of fourth years were having a ways down from him, but they weren't loud enough for Harry to eavesdrop on. Agitatedly, he scooped up a spoonful of porridge and swept it into his mouth. He'd like to know what the early morning hype was about, but having no one to talk to kind of left him out of the loop.

He gazed across the room to see that even a non-morning individual like Edward was bright eyed and gregarious as he conversed with Alex and a couple of other Gryffindors. He would have liked to have been comfortable enough to go over and ask his friends what they, and everyone else, were so excited about. However, he wasn't, so he sat there, mindlessly eating his porridge and deciding he'd wait until after breakfast to ask the twins what was up.

He looked down the table from him and briefly caught Malfoy staring at him, but the other had whipped his head around so quickly that Harry wasn't sure if Malfoy really had been staring at him or not. Of course, that just made him wary, so he continued to gaze down the table suspiciously. Malfoy didn't turn to look at him again, but Harry thought that he could see a subtle smirk plastered on the git's face. That, when combined with the buzzing of the students, made him even more irritated because surely the two were not mutually exclusive. Then, because Malfoy had seemed to developed this personal vendetta against Harry, the combination of events made him uncomfortable. Sure, he could just be paranoid—it was unlikely the excitement had anything to do with Harry—but why did Malfoy have to look so smug just then?

While wrapped up in such thoughts, Harry missed his opportunity to catch Alex or Edward and ask them just what was going on. Then, to

top it all off, all through his morning classes, nothing could Harry gleam from any one conversation that had happened around him that could tell him just what it was that everyone was so bloody anxious for. Normally, he wouldn't have been so affected by the situation, but he had been feeling out of sorts lately and was becoming more and more easily agitated by things. The morning's enthusiasm was proving to be no exception.

Recovering from another disastrous Potions class, he sulked his way on up the stairs so he could get to another one of his favorite classes: Defense. He slowly trudged to the room, everyone bounding happily past him, and just as class was to commence, Harry plopped himself down into a secluded corner of the room. Normally, Lockhart was already prancing about, the eager git that he is, but it seemed he was running a little late.

Harry rapped his fingers across the desk, and as he waited alongside the class for Lockhart to make an appearance, he began smelling something awful. At first it was odd but tolerable, however, as the seconds ticked on, the fouler the smell became until the odor had him and everyone else in the room covering their noses. That seemed to dour everyone's annoyingly happy moods.

Finally, after decades of sitting in the malodorous bog, in rushed Lockhart wearing a most curious band that covered the top of his head entirely. What made it strange was that it was a shimmering purple giving Lockhart the appearance of having a very violet, bald head. It'd be more comical if Harry wasn't so concerned with not gagging.

On the verge of true nausea, Harry watched as Lockhart hurried along the classroom, throwing open window after window. Some of the students were eyeing the opened windows greedily as if they'd like nothing more than to hang their gasping faces outside for fresh air.

"Hullo, class!" Lockhart greeted breathlessly as he went down the line to open the final window. He struggled with it, heaved up on it, pulled his wand out and did some overly intricate waves, and ignored it when nothing happened. He turned to the class, flashed his pearly whites, and dusted off his hands. It was then that Harry noticed that there was a clip pinching Lockhart's nose closed. "Well, today I have planned for you something that I daresay will inspire

your tired minds. Some of you have just come from Potions class—a bore I'm sure!" He chuckled heartily to himself. "But we mustn't blame Professor Snape. Some just lack a certain... flare!" The Slytherins, Harry noted, looked ready to throttle Lockhart.

"But I'm afraid the last class got so excited that I am forced to change a few things," Lockhart nasally announced, his hand mindlessly rubbing at his purple, capped head. "So let's just hope you all fair better, yes?" he grinned as he clapped his hands together. "Right!" He moved down the rows, pointing blithely to this student and that one, forming the groups. Most looked very displeased by the arrangements as Ravenclaws and Slytherins were forced into teams. Harry's own group was of like-mindedness, showing little regard to politeness as they stared surly at him. It wasn't as if Harry was particularly pleased with the prospect of working with others either, but he gathered his things and ambled on to the awaiting Ravenclaws as it was evident they weren't going to move over to him.

He sat down and nodded at each of the three students. One of them was a tall, lanky boy with a face that looked as though it was being squeezed much too close together. His name, Harry thought, was Derald. The other boy was much smaller and plumper with brassy, blond hair and large brown eyes by the name of Timothy. The final group member, Andrea, was a nebbish girl with long, braided brown hair and large frames that covered much of her small face. He'd never spoken to any of them, but Harry had always made a point to familiarize himself with his surroundings and that included knowing the names of his class mates. After giving recognition to each of them, he went to staring at his clasped hands before him. This was going to be a long class, was what he thought.

"Now that I've assigned your groups, let's move on to the lesson," Lockhart said as he took position at the front of the classroom. "As I mentioned earlier, the class before you took things... a bit too far—I fear the lesson I planned was far too exciting—My fault, really," he said, making a grandiloquent show of regret. "But, I've taken the precautionary steps to avoid replicating such a thing." He moved to the blackboard which Harry hadn't noticed had been covered. Some of the students were actually leaning forward in their seats, excited to learn what lesson they'd be undertaking. Harry knew better.

If anything, Lockhart had a talent and (as he had admitted to earlier) a flare for the dramatics. He was able to build suspense and keep one hanging on his every word, that was until one got to know the git better and see him for what he really was—a sham. His ability to garner attention made him more suitable for acting rather than teaching because it was evident the man knew next to nothing. Harry wasn't impressed at all, and he knew that as soon as Lockhart removed the curtain off of his blackboard, that no one else in the class would be either.

Unsurprisingly, once the blackboard was revealed, the class gathered in a collective moan. Their lesson—the exciting lesson—was on horned salamanders. Harry read further on and found that not only was the lesson about salamanders, but the students weren't even going to interact with the creatures. Lockhart had felt it necessary to break them up into groups all for the sole purpose of writing an essay on the amphibians. Brilliant.

At least now Harry knew why his professor had found it necessary to do such a hat. He was pretty certain that the "excitement" involved the salamander's caustic poison and Lockhart's wavy hair. If only Harry had been there, though...

Lockhart, undeterred by the groans, looked about the class eagerly. "Please read pages 103 to 111 in my book, *Magical Me*. Make sure to pay special attention to the part where I come across a whole birthing ground of them," he said, tapping the side of his nose. "Each person in the group is to research one aspect of the salamander that's useful. Oh! And a certain prize to the group that correctly identifies in what way my *Pruina* charm was of use to the mountain people of Sierra de Gredos!" With that, Lockhart ambled over to his desk and sat down to sign what looked to be a bunch of smiling pictures of himself.

With one last disgusted look at Lockhart, Harry turned to face his Ravenclaw peers. With a jolt, he realized that somehow within the time that Lockhart had assigned the groups and now, the three Ravenclaws had already allocated their respective tasks and were already flipping mercilessly through the book while unabashedly ignoring him. He sardonically congratulated whatever wizard had ordained it necessary for separate houses within a school of shallow teenagers before reining in his irritability and setting himself down to the task at hand.

He glanced over each of the passages the Ravenclaws were reading. One was reading on the salamander's skin, another on its eyes, and the third on its spleen. He resisted the urge to snort. He flipped a through a few more pages and stopped on the page where there was a long (and very winded) passage regarding what Harry thought, to be one of the most important parts of the salamander: its horn.

At first, he tried diligently to read the passage, but the further he went along, the more apparent Lockhart's ineptness became. So far, all he had managed to digest was that the salamander had a very vibrant—'and wildly stylish,'—purple horn, that, as far as Lockhart was concerned, did nothing really for the poor beast who would surely have refuted such a horn if it had been given the choice. 'But such is the way of life!' He shook his head tiredly. He brushed his bottom lip with his quill as he pondered the assignment. He supposed he could always improvise by combining what little he really knew about the salamander with a few cloy praises for Lockhart, quoting him where it was safest to do so. With that decision, he set to work. Surely he'd receive good marks for this inane exercise.

The class fell silent say for the soft drags of quill against parchment. Harry wasn't sure if it was because the students were really attentive or merely trying to rush the essay along. He knew which category he fell into. He glanced over at the three other working taciturn around him and was shocked to see that they had already managed to fill two feet of parchment. Wondering how in the world they were able to find such information among rubbish, he set himself to match their ferocity. He wouldn't get the lowest marks. Not in this joke of a class.

The minutes seemed to only mosey by as Harry neared the end of the essay. He hoped that once he was done the bells would sound, releasing them from this tedium. Just as he scribed the last of his sentences, the ceiling bellowed in loud rumbles that shook the chandelier. The candles flickered as they swayed to and fro while dust and cobwebs pounded down upon them from the rattling.

The whole class jerked to look up at the ceiling, even Lockhart's attention managed to be pulled away from his own ego. Just as quickly as it had happened, though, the ceiling ceased its groaning, and the dust stopped raining down. Most of the class returned to

their work unaffected, chalking it up to be apparent dilapidations of the withered castle. Only Harry lingered with his head tilted up because under the quiet creak of the still slightly swaying chandelier, he thought he heard... a voice? He strained his hearing as best he could.

Creak. Whoosh. Creak. Whoosh.

He narrowed his eyes. He knew he had heard something else.

"... so thirsty..."

There!

"What do you mean by this?"

Harry blinked, his heart pounding, and reluctantly pulled his focus from the ceiling onto a finger pointing to his paper and then up to the face of one of the Ravenclaws—Derald. "Pardon?" Harry struggled to say.

The boy looked peeved but with slight indignation, he reiterated. "What do you mean by—'the poison from the salamander's horn is especially caustic, able to corrode most metals... a single drop can bring down a full grown mantichora'... they are known to spike their horns into fruits just to poison their prey that feast upon the food...'? How is any of that useful?"

"How is it not?" Harry bit back, at a loss for where the boy's derision stemmed from.

"Those are all negative connotations. The professor asked for us to write about its useful qualities," he lectured,

"Then it all depends upon your definition of useful, doesn't it?" Harry said quietly, feeling a slight thudding in his head.

"I don't believe the definition of a word changes because of your own inference," Andrea quipped. Harry didn't even have time to respond to the girl's remark as Derald opened his mouth again.

"Besides, it's all so easy to write about all the bad things the salamander is capable of, but Lockhart challenged us by asking for what it's helpful traits are," he declaimed.

"Um... no, he really didn't. I believe the term 'useful' was what he said," Harry chided as the thudding persisted and grew. It shouldn't have been that big of a deal. People get headaches all the time—he was no different—except that with his headaches came... other things that he rather not deal with. "And I don't think the definition is exclusively positive either," he added, glancing at the girl, trying to ignore the pain in his head. "Something with bad intentions would certainly find the salamander's poison helpful, wouldn't you say?" Harry explained calmly, his earlier surprise replaced now only with surging annoyance. "Besides if your going to admonish me, make sure you've at least thoroughly read my paper otherwise you'll just appear ignorant," and he held up his paper and pointed to a particular passage, conveying that the boy should read it.

Reluctantly, Derald set his unfounded glare away from Harry and onto Harry's parchment. His eyes darted back and forth, the gaze lowering down the parchment until the boy stopped reading. Harry had felt it necessary to write on both the positive and negative aspects of the amphibian. The salamander's horn was sometimes shaved and grounded, the bits used in the more potent antidotes towards other poisons since the horn itself was immune to the very caustic poison it encased.

"... sorry..." he mumbled, sitting back in his chair. "I only read the first bit, and this is for a group grade... and I just didn't..." and he stopped abruptly.

"Didn't what? Didn't think I was taking it seriously?" Harry asked, rubbing at his temples. In truth, he really wasn't, but the boy didn't have to know that.

"More like... I didn't want you sabotaging it," Derald ventured. Harry stiffened.

"What? Sabotage? Why would I—?" Harry stopped his stammering by gritting his teeth together as a particularly sharp throb in his head overtook him.

"How aggravating..." Harry fumed, more to his current onslaught of the headache rather than the Ravenclaws who eyed him defensively.

"It's to be expected," Derald retorted. Pulled back from the pounding in his skull for just a moment, Harry stared at the Ravenclaw incredulously.

"That's quite an idiotic thing to assume of someone you don't even know." The boy didn't answer, but then again, he didn't have to. Harry knew where the boy's reasoning bore from. Merlin he was so sick of this inter-house feuding. "Just so you know, I could have as easily assumed that of you," he added cynically.

"I thought that you had already," Derald reckoned. The two other Ravenclaws exchanged looks, but Harry was too preoccupied by the boy next to him to know what passed between the two others. With resignation, Harry sighed.

"Again, it's really stupid," he repeated.

"Says you!" Derald exclaimed louder than he should have, drawing in the attention of the neighboring students.

"Says any sensible person," Harry replied evenly, despite his increasing anxiety. Why was he getting so worked up? Derald was being an idiot, like a load of other people at this school. That didn't mean that Harry should be reacting this badly. Of course, his true concern was over what was causing the headache...

"That's rich, coming from someone like you," Derald seethed, and now the whole class was riveted on the confrontation, say but Lockhart who was happily entranced by his own headshots. All the unwavering stares weren't helping matters, but Harry was feeling so riled, he didn't want to back down either. And the growing violence of his headache only seemed to spur him on.

"Someone like me?" Harry felt his lips hook up in a smirk. "Well you better just spell it out. I'm sure someone like me is way too insensible to understand you otherwise." Derald visibly bristled, as the class began to whisper among themselves.

"You know what I'm getting at," Derald whispered, peeking around at a table consisting of the closest Slytherins, Nott and Parkinson. That

made Harry look around, too, and the one that caught his attention was a composed Malfoy looking back at Harry with something like... approval? Harry shook his head.

"Look, this is getting really ridiculous," Harry conceded. "Let's just put an end to this." Harry didn't want to win this argument if it meant he'd be accepted by someone like Malfoy.

"Just like that?" Derald scoffed, disbelievingly.

"Why not?" Harry sighed tired, rubbing at his aching temples, wishing he could just spell Derald to stop talking.

"What are you up to?" the Ravenclaw seethed, unwavering in his determination to prove his point. His fellow house mates seemed uneasy, but Derald was unconcerned with this.

"I'm not up to anything," Harry snapped, despite himself.

And the whispers continued to grow amongst the class, but there was one particular string of words being hushed out that made Harry's blood drain. He could barely distinguish it among the murmurs of the teenagers, but he knew it was there because he had sensed it before that one night down an empty corridor... the voice with so much malice in it...

"Dammit," he hissed out in broken protest.

He sensed his hands ball up into fists, as his mind pulsated with such fervor that his skull felt as if it were continuously being struck.

Merlin, he was so... so...

"...so hungry..."

There was a shift in the air as the room began pulsating with something galvanic. Harry felt it. He knew this feeling. It has happened before, after all, and he wanted... he wanted it to stop...

"Look just admit I was right, and I'll back off," Derald said determinedly. "You lot think you're all so superior, with your smug faces and stupid lineage—"

Then he snapped his hand open—just for release—and he let out the breath that he'd been keeping captive in his lungs...

"Just shut it, will you!"

CRACK!

It took a moment for Harry to realize what had just happened. He retracted his hand back, feeling his fingers tingling uncomfortably, as everyone's eyes were upon him. It was Derald's expression that made him want to retreat completely. The boy's eyes were opened so wide, his mouth slightly agape as the hairs atop his head stood completely on end.

Harry's instinct was to apologize immediately—Why was he always doing stupid things like this?—and he was just preparing the first syllable of what was sure to be a longwinded admission, when Derald, realizing he was most assuredly still alive and seemingly unscathed, lashed out.

"You attacked me!" His undeniable astonishment was made all the more prevalent once he realized that the very ends of his hair were slightly singeing.

"No! I didn't mean to," Harry replied reflexively, throwing his hands up as if physically bracing for a round of hexes but really just to show that he was wandless. Derald didn't say anything back for a minute, but Harry was certain it was because he was mentally going through his magical repertoire for the vilest curse he could think of, if the glare was anything to go by.

"What's going on over here?" came the hurried tone of Lockhart, who appeared frantically by Derald's side. The Ravenclaw said nothing, though, as he continued to glower. Harry, too, found he couldn't speak even if he had wanted to.

"I... I think he's been shocked, sir," came the flustered squeal of Andrea as she looked upon Derald concernedly.

"He's in shock, you say?" Lockhart mused, as he waved a hand before the Ravenclaw's unflinching stare.

"No, sir. He's been shocked," the other Ravenclaw boy, Timothy, repeated, but instead of watching Derald, his accusing focus was solely dedicated to Harry.

"Hmm, yes... I see," Lockhart murmured as he glanced over the Ravenclaw. "What's your name?" he shouted stupidly at the student, as if the boy had been potentially brain damaged.

"Sir?" The Ravenclaw acknowledged Lockhart warily from the corner of his eye before returning to his attention back onto Harry.

"Tsk, tsk. The poor boy's forgotten who is he. No matter! Luckily, I know just the counter-spell for this malady!" he announced, brandishing his wand. "Now class, see up close how I managed to cure a key witness' Obfuscation when Baron Brackish was on trial—leading to the unveiled testimony that brought swift and indelible justice for the poor suppressed water imps of Little Briny!" he chimed with a slight wink. "Now what was the correct intonation..." he muttered as his wand came very close to smacking Derald in the temple.

"Look, I'm fine!" the Ravenclaw exclaimed agitatedly before Lockhart could inflict actual damage. Harry wanted to take that to mean that this rift was over, but Derald hadn't shown concede so easily just yet.

"So... what's all this then?" Lockhart asked, looking between the two taut students as if disappointed that there was no serious injury to be seen.

"Like I said... I was attacked," Derald said gruffly.

"And like I said, I didn't mean to! It just... it just happens sometimes! It's not like I cursed you! It was like... like a spark or something. You know, static electricity?" This was the most Harry had been allowed to explain, but he didn't think his hurried and slight apathetic apology was going to be enough.

"But you meant to curse me," Derald threw out defensively.

"Trust me," Harry stated flatly, steeling himself. This was getting so out of hand. One half of him was unbelievably appalled that he had done the thing he feared most; he had unleashed an episodic magical outburst. But the other half of him... was glad no one was

hurt and annoyed that he was being accused so roughly. "...If I had meant to, you would have been." Derald's eyes narrowed just slightly as though trying to decipher an intricate threat.

"Look, sir, me and Derald were fighting," Harry began, shifting his focus onto Lockhart. He didn't think he'd make much headway with the Defense professor, but it had to be better than talking to Derald any further. "And it got out of hand. I didn't use my wand, but I sparked out something. It's happened before," and Harry took a second to squelch whatever childish pity he felt for himself just then, "and this wasn't intentional."

The rest of the class had been unusually quiet, but Harry knew it was because they were all so engrossed within the scene playing out before them. Harry couldn't blame them; it was just a little unsettling.

Lockhart, finally realizing Harry's account had ended, cleared his throat and straightened.

"Well, yes... that all makes perfect sense to me," Lockhart concurred as he stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"No it doesn't—" Derald protested.

"Look, you should obviously go see the nurse if I attacked you and all," Harry said sternly. Derald stood up and coiled in slightly as if readying himself to strike out at Harry.

"Yes, yes. Quite necessary! I'm afraid my skills can only be expended so far, Mr. Gomez. Best tarry over to Madam Pomfrey. My dear, if you would please escort him," Lockhart said, nodding to Andrea who stood all too readily.

Derald, at first, made no attempt to move, his stance firm and towering, but at the slightest tug of his robes by Andrea and Derald sighed.

"Alright, Fine!" He turned sharply on his heel and stormed out of the class with little Andrea in tow. Harry felt himself loosen. He hadn't realized he'd been so tense.

"And sir, if I may please be excused?" and without waiting for a reply, Harry snatched up his essay, and after thrusting it upon the bewildered Defense professor, gathered his things as dexterously as he could, and left, ignoring every incredulous, accusatory, haughty, or congratulatory glance threw his way.

"Uh right...Class! I... I still expect those papers to be finished and turned in once class is over!" he heard Lockhart announce as he rounded the corner of the classroom door. He cleared the classroom cluttered hallway of the second floor unto a more abandoned stretch of corridor that would eventually lead him to the grand staircase.

So...

"So that was something," Harry thought, ready to feel the usual pangs of self-admonishment that followed after one of his outburst. He walked and walked and waited for the guilt to hit him, but as he slugged his way down the hall, it never fully came. He paused. Sure he felt bad for Derald and even embarrassment at how it had all unfolded, but more than that... More than that he was...

... relieved.

This was one of things he'd stressed over since he first knew he was transferring to this unfamiliar school, and not just stressed over but actively worried and panicked over. The scenarios he played over and over again in his head were filled with way more injury, way more accusation, way more guilt, and the sentence of a lifetime to Azkaban, and it wasn't just that Harry was a twelve year old boy with an overactive imagination. Because he had injured someone before...

But maybe... now that he was older, now that he had been properly trained, instructed—Maybe now such a thing wasn't such an immediate concern?

...

Harry slouched against the wall for support and let his bag fall beside him. He felt...

...better.

Running a hand through his hair, he decided he should at least see if Derald really was alright. It was one thing to assume he had been left unscathed, but the peculiar thing about magic was that sometimes it left no outward traces at all. Perhaps Harry sometimes expected the worst, but experience instilled in him a necessity to do so. Maybe Derald had been injured.

Slowly, he trudged along the corridors, thankful that he came across no one, until he came to the hospital wing. Fortifying himself, he peeked around the corner of the entry and into the hospital wing. An older woman with a very kind face was rushing about the room, attending Derald occupying one of the empty beds as diligently as if she were his own mother. Harry lingered in the doorway, hesitant to go any further. He tentatively wrapped his fingers around the doorframe, the only part of himself he could manage to get beyond the hallway.

Derald was sitting up in the bed holding a pan atop his lap, and Harry guessed was use it served. Derald did look a little green in the face, and Harry didn't know if it was because of his magical leak or if because Derald had riled himself so tight that he gave himself nausea. He'd hoped it was the latter; Harry's stomach sometimes felt unsettled after such occurrences.

He knew that he needed to apologize more accurately, but maybe... at that moment... it was too soon to do so. Derald had seemed ready to throttle him earlier, and besides, apologizing now? What good would that do? The only thing it would serve would be to alleviate Harry's own guilt. Selfish. How selfish he was.

"As you can see, he is unharmed," came a soft voice that both soothed and alarmed Harry. Harry whipped around to find Dumbledore hovering behind him, the older wizard peering at the second year Ravenclaw through his half-moon spectacles.

"Are y-you sure," Harry stammered out, turning back to watch Derald as Madam Pomfrey took his temperature.

"Of course... a little shaken but perhaps no more than you," Dumbledore explained in that hushed voice that was always unlike anything Harry had ever heard. "How are you doing, Harry?" Something about the way he asked it maybe? Or perhaps it was because Harry hadn't expected the concern to be directed at him at

all, but he felt his chest swell with something akin to gratitude. But he felt childish for such a reaction, and in his embarrassment, he kept his mouth shut.

"Harry, have you ever tried Turkish delight?"

What? Did he mishear? Harry ventured a glance towards the headmaster only to find the aging professor was smiling gently down upon him. "No need to look so confused. It's only a dessert! Come! I think I may still have a few stashed away!" He may have made to leave, but Harry stood rooted to the spot. Maybe he wasn't getting it, but shouldn't Dumbledore be concerned with Derald over Harry? Over dessert?

"Harry... there's nothing you can do at this moment," Dumbledore began quietly, stepping closer to Harry, a movement that made Harry shrink back instinctively. If Dumbledore was alarmed by this reflex, he didn't show it. The only thing he conveyed was an understanding that Harry knew he shouldn't have been granted. "Madam Pomfrey is very skilled, Harry. A witch that can undo any malady, and I doubt that you can do better than her," Dumbledore smiled. "Besides, all that boy needs now is rest. But I daresay you could do with some company."

And with a swish of his robes, Dumbledore was already moving down the corridor, not stopping to check and see if Harry was actually following him. With one last concerned look to the Ravenclaw boy and not knowing what else to do, Harry trailed behind Dumbledore's surprisingly agile steps.

"I can't believe that happened!"

Draco rolled his eyes, and turned over onto his stomach in a very undignified and un-Malfoy-ish way, but he really didn't care at that moment.

"Draco, can you? Can you believe that happened?" Theodore spouted off. For the last twenty hours it seemed, what had occurred in Defense was all anyone could manage to talk about, even those who hadn't even been in the class. Of course, Draco couldn't really blame them. That was he could manage to think about. "Well, can you, Draco?"

"Yes, Theo, because among my many talents, seeing into the future is one of them," Draco replied coolly, straightening out a crease that had formed in his bed sheets. Theodore was uncharacteristically unperturbed by Draco's response, focusing, instead, onto Blaise who was more than willing to discuss it. Classes were over for the day, and Draco along with the other second year boys were occupying their dorm until dinner. He figured that much of the school was doing the same, everyone either in their dorms or the common rooms. He would never know how knowledge spread in the school. Was it the ghosts that got the word along or was it even the walls themselves? Draco didn't especially care, he just wondered.

"I mean could you feel it?" Theo was asking of the usually more taciturn Slytherin. Blaise shook his head, his eyes alight with an excitement Draco had rarely seen him exude.

"It was... I dunno... electric, wasn't it?" Blaise put forth cautiously, unsure of the word to use so as to describe what they had all felt shooting through the Defense classroom earlier.

"Mmm... that's it!" Theo affirmed. Draco again rolled his eyes. This was getting a bit ridiculous. They were all second years, but here Theo and Blaise were acting like toddlers all excited as if they had found a new toy or something. Draco wouldn't admit that he was jealous, even if he was because Malfoys did no such thing—even if he was the one who first knew that there was something different about Harry. Even Crabbe and Goyle were edging forward on their beds, attentive to every comment Theo and Blaise made. Very unlike those two.

"You saw how those Ravenclaws were acting," Blaise went on. "They were gibing a response out of him. Bet you, though, that weren't expecting that."

"I wasn't expecting that!" Theo added.

"I'll admit, I didn't think Potter had it in him. Who would have thought that he would defend the good name of Slytherin?" and Blaise actually smirked more than what was customary of him.

"What are you talking about?" Crabbe inquired, his pudgy face riveted solely upon Blaise.

"Well, towards the end of class, that imbecile Gomez was making slander against what it means to be Slytherin," Blaise began, "and all I can guess is that Potter hadn't liked that very much."

"Please..." Draco mumbled, exasperated.

"I'm sorry, Draco. Is it that you are unconcerned with what happened or is it you can't understand it?" Blaise asked. That comment ignited a repose Draco to snap up like a cobra.

"It's not that I'm unconcerned," Draco replied icily, imitating the stance his father often took with lesser and unfortunate idiots that dared to cross him, "I just won't pretend to understand more than I do. However, that seems to be something that you are... unconcerned with." Blaise visibly bristled, a reaction that nobody was every really witnessed to. Draco smirked.

"I don't get your meaning," Blaise bit back smoothly.

"You're inferring that... Potter," –Draco had to think of the name to use, his natural inclination being to use Harry's first name— "was somehow in control of that incident—that he willingly did that, but that's not what I saw," Draco explained slowly, confidently. Blaise narrowed his eyes.

"Explain."

Draco shrugged his shoulders. "That's all I can tell you for now," he replied.

"That's because you don't know anything," Theo threw at him, smirking towards Blaise and shaking his head. They could think that if they wanted. Draco wasn't bothered by that because he knew that what he had said had gotten to Blaise and Theo, and that they were going to give it serious thought later, perhaps when they figured everyone else to be asleep. But he betted that they wouldn't figure anything out before he did because Draco was good at sniffing out this sort of stuff.

Content with the knowledge that he'd be first to figure out the oddity that was Harry Potter, he turned unto his side and closed his eyes. Homework could wait. Today had been an eventful day. He even almost forgot that he was supposed to be mad at Harry.

"It's pretty good, isn't it?"

Harry tried to nod, but he was having some difficulty. The Turkish delight that Dumbledore had offered him wasn't what he had been expecting. The usually jelly-like dessert was much more... wobbly than he had anticipated, and he was finding it impossible to strike the dessert with his fork. Every time he tried to bring his fork down, the dessert had a way of wiggling just out of reach.

"Harry, you've barely touched yours," Dumbledore remarked just as he swooped another bite of the Turkish delight into his mouth. How was he doing it?

"It's... just not... complying with me, sir," Harry grunted as he slammed the fork down multiple times, determined to eat the dessert, while missing every single time. Defeated, he placed his fork down beside his plate and was telling himself that that was not a victory dance the dessert was giving him.

"I am rather very fond of this," Dumbledore said, finishing up what Harry could only guess was a delightful dessert. While Dumbledore took his time in dabbing off the bit of dessert from the corners of his mouth, Harry familiarized himself with the room he was in.

The headmaster's office was grand, lit by tiny effulgent lights that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere. Harry was amazed at how many books the headmaster seemed to keep; it seemed as though the walls themselves were made from the spines of books. And not only were there millions upon millions of reading material, but the trinkets and objects this man was able to collect in one spot was mind boggling. Harry had never seen so many unfamiliar and amazing objects (and living with the Coles, Harry has seen a great many a things). The man even had a phoenix! A real living Phoenix! Harry didn't even know that a person could keep one as a familiar, but then again, Dumbledore wasn't most people, and he also had the inkling that a person didn't choose a Phoenix for a familiar. It chose you.

"It's all worthless, I assure you," Dumbledore said, and Harry realized that he'd been unabashedly ignoring the headmaster. "But I can't seem to make myself get rid of a lot of things," the aged wizard confessed.

"What do all these things do?" Harry asked, curious.

"Not much any more, I'm afraid. But they used to do many things. That one right there," and Dumbledore gestured to a knobby and bent telescope-type object, "used to show you any star you'd like, just as long as you knew it existed. And that," he then pointed to a square cube that looked to be made of gas... or clouds, "that can take on the smell of any body of water you'd like." Harry felt his brows furrow in confusion. "Ah yes, you're probably thinking what use could that serve for anyone?" Dumbledore chuckled.

"Maybe..." Harry replied, unsure if he had just insulted the headmaster.

"The only purpose it serves is to be of no use at all," Dumbledore explained. Harry nodded his head as if he understood even if he didn't at all.

"What's that do?" Harry asked, pointing to a small object shoved to the corner of Dumbledore's desk, unused but probably not forgotten about. It looked to be like a small cigarette lighter, and that shouldn't have been odd, but Harry didn't take Dumbledore to be a smoker.

"This? This... I'm rather fond of actually," Dumbledore answered, swooping the object into his hand. "This, Harry, is a Deluminator," and he clicked it once and the light from a nearby candle gave out with a poof. Then with another click, the light sprung back, emitting its glow once more.

"Seems like that be useful, sir," Harry commented, waving his hand over the disappearing-reappearing flame as though the light itself was magical and not the deluminator. Dumbledore gave a knowing wink at Harry as he slipped the deluminator into his desk drawer.

"It has been, Harry. On multiple occasions." Harry didn't know what that was suppose to mean, but he summed it up to be another quirk of Dumbledore's since that was the easiest thing to do. "Now, Harry, I'm sure you've concluded that I didn't ask you here for the sole purpose of trying Turkish Delight, no matter that it was delicious," Dumbledore said, facing Harry with his wizened expression. Harry gulped.

It wasn't that he had forgotten about what had happened with Derald, it was just that he had rather been enjoying himself and wasn't looking forward to explaining. He knew that he should, knew that intimately, it's just he had never known how to put into words what happened when he became... riled. He had played out the scenario in his head as he had trudged behind Dumbledore up to this office, and it hadn't played out to well.

"Well, sir, I get headaches you see, and then because I can't contain them, I sort of... explode sometimes. I've hurt someone else before, but you knew about that didn't you?" Harry had explained, and then Dumbledore would calmly look at him and say:

"Yes, I know. That's why I can no longer allow you to attend this school. You understand right, dear boy?"

He knew all too well the dangers he posed for those around him. It's what the Dursley's had imparted him with, after all. But maybe because this time hadn't been so bad, the Headmaster would be less... severe?

"I once knew this wizard by the name of Thom Talbot. Not a bad wizard at all. Rather skilled, in fact. But he had these terrible sniffles, as he called them. It wasn't that he was sick, he just had the misfortune of sneezing a lot," Dumbledore cut in, and Harry was pulled from his train of thought.

"Sir?"

"He sneezed, but they weren't normal sneezes. His sneezes are always mightier than the average person's, and with him being a wizard and all... Well, you can imagine how it can be potentially disastrous. Many a structures were blown away after Thom sneezed near them. I remember one time, back when I was abroad with the Magical Meanderings Society, Thom had a particularly nasty spell. You see the Tower of Pisa wasn't always... leaning." Dumbledore said vaguely.

"Sir, he couldn't have done... that. Wasn't that tower built in the twelfth century?" Harry exclaimed, leaning forward disbelieving. Dumbledore laughed, and it made Harry grow red in the cheeks.

"Ah, dear boy, you got me there. Old as me and Thom are we are not yet quite that ancient. But you see I wasn't entirely lying. He did sneeze, and he did topple the tower over, but we put it right back. Although," and Dumbledore leaned in closer to Harry, his blue eyes alight with a mischief he thought only Edward capable of. "between you, me, and Thom it's two degrees lower after we left it." He gave a knowing nod and then with a smile, he straightened back into his seat. "It was a scandal of course. The Ministry of Magic was in a ruckus for three whole weeks making sure every muggle that was in a hundred mile radius of the tower was obliterated, but even they can't tell that me and Thom didn't quite put the tower back as we had found it."

Harry was mesmerized. Some part of him couldn't really believe that this story was true-that two wizards no matter how mighty Dumbledore was and is- that a famous structure like the Tower of Pisa had tilted two more degrees all because a wizard had made it so was... unreal. But then again, it was that same facet which made him want to believe it as well.

"Why the two degrees?" Harry asked.

"It wasn't my idea, but Thom thought he'd have a bit of fun with his snuffle- it's an old joke now between old friends," Dumbledore offered, smiling kindly. Harry nodded and mulled over the fantastical story once more until something occurred to him.

"Sir, I don't think I know... what the story's meaning is," Harry said, his head muddled with the image of him sneezing a stun attack on Derald.

"Thom is an exceptionally good wizard, but sometimes his magic just needs an outlet," Dumbledore replied softly.

"I don't understand," Harry admitted sheepishly.

"Some of the best wizards can still have hiccups... or in Thom's case, the sniffles, and in your case... a slight outburst."

With the mention of outburst, Harry instinctively stiffened, panic shooting throughout him, making his skin warmer from shame and anxiety.

"No need to be so upset, Harry. These things happen. I suspect you're just not in complete control of your magic just yet. Growing up where you did, with people as condemning of magic as the Dursleys are is stifling." Dumbledore explained gently. Harry remained silent; he had no response to give. He knew that Dumbledore was privy to Harry's time with the Dursleys, with all the unfortunate things that had happened when he was smaller, but to have the man verbalize it all was... uncomfortable.

"I suspect you aren't as fully accepting of your talent as many of your peers are," Dumbledore observed. Though he didn't think it possible at the time, Harry grew more unsettled. Dumbledore could be as insightful as he wanted to be, Harry just wished that the wizard's eye wasn't so fixed on him at the moment. And still, Harry remained taciturn, unable to conjure any reply to Dumbledore's observations. Dumbledore must have sensed Harry's unease for he retracted and gave Harry a warm, encouraging smile. "But that's not for now," Dumbledore said.

"Before I send you off, I want you to promise me you'll stop by and visit Madame Pomfrey. I'll let all your professors know that I kept you from class and that your assignments be given a day's leniency, so you can rest easy," Dumbledore offered. Harry, not knowing what else to do besides comply, inclined his head in acceptance. "Good, now off you go," Dumbledore said, standing and gesturing to his door.

Harry got up and left, but not before Dumbledore proffered a bunch of the left-over Turkish Delights into his hands. "A midnight snack, yes?" was Dumbledore's only explanation. So with a handful of jelly-like candies, Harry trudged to the Hospital wing, all the while unaware of the headmaster's watchful gaze on his form until he was gone from view completely.

By the time Harry had mustered up enough backbone to return to the Slytherin commons, the room was devoid of all people. He hadn't anticipated it being so late, but was grateful nonetheless. Better yet was the sound of the snores that came from his dormitory. He eased the door open, careful to not let in so much light as to wake the other sleeping figures, and tiptoed to his own bed, not bothering to change out of his school uniform.

He collapsed unto to the mattress, and the coolness of the sheets was a comfort to his skin. He flexed his fingers, now bandaged with the best care, to loosen the windings a bit. To his surprise, he had managed to give himself second degree burns from his outburst. Madame Pomfrey had applied the best ointment but because it was Harry's own magic that had caused the injury and not a known spell, the ointment wouldn't be as effective. He'd have to go back to visit her again in the next couple of days, but Harry couldn't really worry about that right then.

The Calming Draught given at the behest of Madame Pomfrey and against Harry's feeble protests was now taking it's famed effect. His body relaxed, and Harry couldn't even marvel at how tense he had really been before his mind grew fuzzy with sleep. Relinquishing the day's trials, he gratefully (and maybe even selfishly) let the onslaught of sleep overtake him completely.

A/N: Please do review! I live for them! I'm a shameless beggar!

Chapter 13: The Boneman Troupe and the Chamber

When Harry blinked his eyes open the next morning, he felt unusually sluggish. He blearily gazed around the room and found that he was the only one there. Looking out the window, it was clear that it was still pretty early as the pinkish glow of dawn was just settling into the dorm. Malfoy and Zabini were always early risers, but Harry at least always managed to wake up before the other three.

That was just fine for him, though.

With one last stretch, he slid off his bed, got dressed, brushed his teeth, attempted to reel in his unruly hair, thought better of it, gathered his things, and slowly made his way from the Slytherin commons to the Great Hall. His pace was more than leisurely, it was downright dragging. As he navigated the hallway, he wondered how long the effects of the Calming Draught were supposed to last. He'd studied it before, but Merlin if he couldn't think clearly right now. What if he fell asleep again at breakfast and drowned in his porridge?

It occurred to him then that he wasn't particularly hungry. As he pondered this, he also realized that not only was he not hungry, but that he wasn't too keen on being around the other Slytherins either. With that insight, he turned on his heel and headed straight towards the front doors.

Upon reaching the outdoors, his face was blasted with that particularly crisp wind that seemed only to exist on cool, autumn mornings. Picking out his favorite spot by the lake, he shrugged off his school bag and walked as close to the water's edge as he could without getting his shoes wet. The lake was oddly serene that morning, and after minutes of complete repose and silence, Harry wished that the squid would appear to break up the stillness.

In the quiet, he began to wonder how the day would pan out. He didn't have any classes with the Ravenclaws that day, but he was sure that word had gotten round about his... freak out. He didn't know if it was the lingering remnants of the Calming Draught or what, but even as he reflected upon yesterday's... situation, he found that he didn't feel the usual tide of unease and regret. He bit his lower lip in contemplation.

In that moment, he wished he had someone to talk to about it. Belatedly, it occurred to him that he had Edward and Alex to talk to. He almost smiled at how stupid it was for him to forget such a thing. It wasn't like the brothers wouldn't understand—they'd seen such instances before— and it wasn't like Harry wanted to seek their... pity or anything. He just wanted to... talk about it.

As he thought this, he knees were suddenly knocked from behind him.

"Wha-?" he exclaimed as he felt himself trip, but before he stumbled into the lake, two arms hooked under his own and held him back.

"Merlin, Edward! Can't you greet people normally?" Harry asked, unlocking his arms from Edward's hold. Edward shrugged while smiling innocently.

"You wanted to see me?" he said by way of reply. Harry cocked his head to the side and blinked a couple of times.

"How could you have possibly known that?" he asked amazedly.

"I thought it was a given that you'd always want to see me," Edward grinned. Harry was about to comment on how correct that statement was when the Alex stepped up behind his brother balancing three mugs between his grasp.

"Oh please. It's too early in the day for your nauseating egotism," came Alex's sullen voice after he nodded to Harry and handed him one of the mugs. The delicious smell of hot chocolate swirled its way up to his nose.

"I thought it was always a bad time for that," Edward quipped, taking his own offered mug. Harry exchanged a bemused glance with Alex before both of them turned it towards Edward.

"Did you just... one up me... at insulting you?" Alex inquired. Edward furrowed his brows, working through the inquiry and staring at his twin perplexedly. Coming to the realization, he shook his head disappointedly.

"You're right... it is too early in the morning," Edward sighed. Alex grinned while taking a victory sip of his hot chocolate, and Harry was just thankful that the brothers were so spirited in the morning. He judged by the yellowing light of the sky that breakfast time would soon be over. Harry took one huge gulp of his hot chocolate. Where to begin, he wondered.

"So... there was a lot of excitement yesterday, huh?" came Edward suddenly.

Harry choked a little on his beverage. Simultaneously, Alex did the same. He looked to Edward who gave him the slightest of smiles while Alex wiped away a bit of hot chocolate that had escaped his mouth.

"Alex told me to not come right out and say it, so I thought I be a little less forward," Edward offered, looking to his brother apologetically. "Ease in, so to speak."

"Well..." and Harry faltered for a second. He was going to talk to them about it, but Edward beating him to it threw him for a moment.

"It's alright, Harry," Alex said consolingly. "If you don't want to talk about it now, that's okay."

"That is not what you said earlier," Edward chimed. Alex tried to discreetly elbow his brother, but Harry saw it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alex replied stiffly.

"Oh, well, I can remind you then. You see, I was in the commons, relaxing, when, in your usual Alex-huffery, you stormed in, going on about how upset Harry surely was and how even if he didn't want to see you, you were going to force the story outta-"

"Alright, Edward. I get it," Alex interrupted heatedly. He faced Harry. "Sorry. I didn't think you'd want to really talk about it. I was going to coax you into telling me," Alex admitted.

"That's okay!" Harry said, confused as to why Alex should apologize to him for anything. "I'm glad you care enough to want to... hound it out of me. And I was going to tell you. Edward just beat me to it,"

Harry explained, feeling relief settle onto him in a way he hadn't anticipated.

"Okay so... what happened," Edward rushed out after gulping down his entire mug of hot chocolate.

"Um... well... what did you hear?" Harry ventured. This way, he could at least gauge what the student body's reaction was. Edward and Alex exchanged a brief look of uncertainty.

"Uh... is that so important?" Edward said, looking unsure.

"Yeah, I mean, what's important is what you say," Alex added. That worried Harry. What were people saying that urged Edward and Alex to sidestep it.

"I had a... flare up," Harry said, glancing back and forth between the two brothers.

"Just... a flare up?" Alex asked.

"Well, no. Not exactly. I sort of... also shocked a Ravenclaw—Derald," Harry admitted. To his surprise, Edward and Alex sighed.

"That's all?" Edward asked. Harry felt his brows furrow.

"What do you mean, 'is that all'?" Harry said.

"No, we understand, it's just... no one got hurt," Alex said.

"I mean... we'd heard you'd stunned the poor fellow—" Edward sighed. "—terrorized him into a corner and just... stunned him. Your version's less... theatrical." And he offered Harry a lopsided grin. Harry felt his own mouth quirk up in response.

"And those bandages?" Alex inquired, gazing at Harry's wrapped hands.

"Oh... that was the backlash of the outburst," Harry explained, holing up his right hand slightly to show Edward and Alex. "At least it was my own hand and not Derald," he smiled. Alex and Edward both frowned. "It's alright, though!" Harry said quickly. "It doesn't hurt."

"So... it's alright then, yeah?" Alex ventured cautiously. Harry took a sip of his still warmed beverage.

"I have to admit... it could have been worse— It has been worse... before," Harry began slowly, trying to pick the right words, "but I feel... I dunno... like maybe the worst part's over." After saying it, he felt a little ridiculous. Of course the worst part wasn't over. The worst part had barely begun. After all, he'd hadn't even really started up on his true assignment. It was just that for the last several weeks, Harry had been consumed by the thought that his magic may flare up and cause real... damage.

"Sure... now everyone knows not to mess with you," Edward joked. "I have to admit, I was a little hesitant to talk to you. You wouldn't believe how much your reputation precedes you." Alex smacked his brother shoulder, shaking his head as if disappointed, but Harry saw the slight smile.

"Yeah... I'm trying to be the Slytherin's new champion," Harry said. Edward and Alex looked stunned for a moment.

"Wait, I'm sorry—" Alex began.

"—but did you just make a joke, mate?" Edward finished.

"About... you know?" Alex added.

"Well, what else am I supposed to do?" Harry replied. "It's just that... I realized I can't... mope about it. It happened. But what I have to make sure is that... it doesn't happen again," he said firmly. Alex and Edward exchanged a brief look between them, and Harry wondered at how much longer it'd be until he could decipher such quick twin code.

"What? Do you think that's a stupid thing to do? Do you think that... I'm just always gonna blow up like that?" Harry shot out, feeling a bitter pang.

"No way, mate!" Edward hastened.

"We're just... relieved, is all," Alex cleared.

"Relieved?" Harry asked.

"It's just that after a flare up, like always before, you'd just..." but Alex struggled, unsure of how to phrase the next part that wouldn't send Harry tail spinning into guilt again.

"—beat yourself up for it," Edward finished. Harry tensed. He couldn't deny it. It was true. He did always sink into a period of self-contempt, but not anymore. How could he get better if he didn't do better? He looked up determined.

"You see? That's why we're relieved," Edward said, smiling broadly at Harry's fixed expression. Alex, too, was grinning. Harry snorted.

"First things first, though. I need to apologize to Derald again—" At this Edward made a face like 'but you already did.' "—properly, this time," Harry finished.

"Harry, if you need us to be there, when you find Derald, you know we'll be there," Alex said. Harry shook his head.

"That's alright. But thanks though," he smiled. Alex returned the smile.

"Well, it looks like breakfast is over," Edward announced, and Harry looked to the Great Hall where he could see students beginning to shuffle out.

"Alright, we'll see you later then?" Alex stated as he placed his empty mug on the ground along with the other two. Harry nodded and bent down to get his bag just as the dishes magically vanished back to the kitchens.

The three of them walked back to the castle and soon parted ways—Harry to Astronomy, the brothers to Transfiguration. He felt many students staring at him. Harry wouldn't deny that their blatant staring wasn't prickling him a bit, but he wouldn't let it undo him as much as it would have normally. He had been telling himself for weeks that he needed to be better—needed to be stronger. It was unfortunate that it had taken something like the incident in DADA to fortify what had so far been only empty affirmations, but he wouldn't let it be in vain.

As he walked into class, he took an empty seat in the back. The Slytherins came in and many with looks of approval towards him. Inwardly, he scoffed. Being praised for an outburst was definitely inexcusable. Then came the Hufflepuffs who didn't bother to look at Harry one way or the other. That was okay by him.

As class settled in and commenced, Harry couldn't help but think how strange it all was. First that the outburst had happened at all (he couldn't quite remember what had set it off; it was all a bit hazy), secondly, his time with the headmaster, and lastly his moment with Edward and Alex and the realization that he had arrived at.

He'd do better. He'd be better. He was sure it was going to take some time, but he needed to at least try. Bemoaning his state but doing nothing to change it— Well, he just couldn't do that.

"Alright class, today we'll be taking a look at the planetary bodies of the heavens!" chimed the professor excitedly.

Harry opened his book to the appropriate page where a painting of the nine planets orbited the sun. He could do this, he told himself.

"Will you be able to catch the snitch?"

Harry looked up from giving his broom one last polish to acknowledge Malfoy. "Sorry?" Malfoy didn't repeat himself, but nodded to Harry's hands, all wrapped up in new bandages.

"It's fine." Malfoy studied Harry a bit longer, as if willing Harry to elaborate, or maybe he just didn't believe him. Either way, Harry turned back to his broom unconcerned. He had Quidditch practice to concentrate on. As he stood to leave for the field, in came Flint.

"Alright, so tomorrow's Halloween and then just two days after that it's the first match of the season. We've been taking it easy up to this point, but you can bet your lazy arse that changes now," Flint announced, baring his crooked teeth. "Alright, team, move out!" The team filed out, but Harry was stopped by the captain. "Potter, how's that hand?" Harry would have been surprised if Flint was actually concerned over his wellbeing, but this was Flint.

"Don't worry. I'll be able to catch the snitch," Harry assured exasperatedly for the millionth time.

"I don't need any lame team members this early on in the season, Potter," Flint threatened.

"Yes, I'll try not to mutilate myself anymore," Harry bit back walking off. He stepped onto the field where the other members were already in motion. Taking a deep breath he settled onto his broom and kicked off into the air.

Sometimes he wondered if being on the Quidditch team would be more trouble than it was worth, but every time Harry got on his broom and began to fly, those musings were quickly dismissed. He could never thank Edward enough for deceiving him onto the team. Harry grinned at the memory.

As he soared higher and higher, he couldn't help but feel a little bit lighter. He had managed to find Derald soon after classes. The boy had been visibly taken aback by Harry's sudden appearance, but Harry had stood his ground. He apologized, and he had been proud that his tone had been as even and sincere as it was. It was unfortunate that Derald wasn't as forthcoming with acceptance, but Harry couldn't—wouldn't blame him.

"So you think it makes it all okay?" Derald had said to him, whispering and looking around as if he didn't want to be overheard by anyone.

"Of course not! I just wanted to tell you that I hadn't meant it. It was an accident."

"Sure it was!" And before Harry had been able to utter another word, Derald had left, suddenly flanked by a crowd of Ravenclaws. So it hadn't gone as well as he would have wished it to, but he had done it. He had swallowed his hesitancy and apologized. He didn't feel absolved or anything, but he was making strides. And that's why he felt just a little bit unburdened.

After another two hours or so, Flint called it quits and ushered the team back to ground. After several demonstrations of Harry catching the snitch in various ways, Flint seemed confident in his abilities once more, and Harry was spared from the lecture that was doled out to the rest of the team. At least Draco was getting better, Harry noted as he walked off to the changing rooms. Malfoy seemed less

concern with sabotaging Harry and more so with actually playing the game, and Harry had to admit that when Malfoy was serious, he was really good.

He had just finished changing and leaving when the rest the team filed in. Flint was sure longwinded. Just straight ahead he caught sight of Edward and Alex who emerged from behind the stands of the Quidditch field.

"Hey guys!" Harry greeted coming up to them.

"Oy, Harry! You were really good up there. I particularly liked that tunnel spin catch you did," Edward said, slapping Harry across the back.

"Would that be because you were the one who taught me that?" Harry winced, moving his shoulder blades up and down.

"Possibly..." Edward grinned.

"So Harry, aren't you excited about tomorrow?" Alex asked suddenly, smiling widely.

"Sure, I guess. It is Halloween," Harry answered. Alex and Edward exchanged looks.

"Yeah but... it's a special Halloween," Edward said.

"Why's that?" Harry inquired.

"Harry, where have you been? It's all anybody has been able to talk about!" Edward chided.

"Well unless you two tell me, I don't hear anything," Harry replied, stiffly.

"Yeah but you haven't picked it up from anybody else?" Alex asked. Harry felt himself getting a little annoyed. He'd been kind of out of it lately, and ever since the Slytherin's dismissal of him, courtesy of Malfoy, he hadn't really interacted with anyone else. Besides, he been perfectly fine with ignoring everyone else, too.

"Well, old Dumbledore has set up a treat for everyone," Edward began.

"And they don't agree to come just for anyone—" said Alex.

"—but of course Dumbledore could pull some strings and book 'em!"

"What is it? Just say it already!" Harry said, feeling the suspense that the two brothers were keen on building.

"Playing Halloween night, the one, the only—" Alex started.

"Boneman Troupe!" Edward finished enthusiastically. Harry blinked.

"You're joking," he said cautiously. The brothers shook their heads while wearing lopsided grins. "Here? The Boneman Troupe? Seriously?"

"Wicked, isn't it?" Edward asked. Harry grinned. The Boneman Troupe was something alright. A five member band who employed the coolest of magic tricks and displays for their show. Being around since the twelfth century meant that they had learned some really cool spells. Not to mention that all five of them were the deceased skeletal remains of their former human selves. Wicked was right.

"How did Dumbledore manage that?" Harry inquired, feeling excited for the first time in a long while.

"Uh... he's Dumbledore," Edward answered.

"Oh right!" Harry laughed.

"But I bet things will be pretty crazy that day," Alex said.

"Well... it is Halloween," Harry replied. As they made their back up to the castle, they continued to talk animatedly about the Halloween special, and now Harry finally understood what everyone's hype was all about.

Finally, morning arrived, and Harry, at last in the loop, woke up extremely excited. He dressed in a hurry, ignoring the odd looks he was getting from his dorm mates, and rushed out of the Slytherin commons to find Alex and Edward.

It was Halloween!

Normally, Harry didn't feel really much of anything about Halloween. His first memories of the holiday were of him being locked up while his porker of a cousin got loads of sweets from his parents. And his aunt and uncle, with every occasional knock on their door, never gave out candy. Instead, they disappointed the group of kids with doled out pamphlets that lectured about the indecency of having children begging for candy.

It wasn't until he came to live with the Coles that Harry realized how special the holiday could be, especially for the wizarding community. Not only that, but it was absolutely Edward's favorite time of year. That's when he embodied the role of the trickster whole-heartedly. Consequently, this also made Halloween one of Alex's least favorite holidays as he was usually Edward's victim. Harry, so far, had way of avoiding such pranks which seemed to vex both brothers greatly.

He thought about last year's Halloween in which everyone at Alseana was allowed to dress up for the day. It usually proved to be a pretty distracting tradition, the teachers had explained, but that never seemed to stop it from happening. Last year, Alex dressed up like a character from one of his favorite novels, but he got made fun of by everyone who said that dressing up like a wizard, even from a story, was no fun at all. Edward donned a hag's costume with warts, bad teeth, wrinkles, hunched back, and all. It was pretty amusing.

Harry didn't own a costume, but luckily the twins had spare ones. It took a load of owls to deliver, but that's not surprising seeing as how Harry then spent Halloween dressed as the mythical Magog. It was quite a spectacle. Harry, as short and thin as he was, seemed to disappear entirely into the costume. He wore a scraggly beard, stuffing his clothes (which looked like ancient amour plating), carried around a shield with a phoenix on it, and heavy boots that made him at least five inches and taller and loads more clumsier.

The costume was part of a set where Edward would dress as Magog and Alex as the other, the brother Gog. However, Alex had refused to dress up like the mythical giant again, crushing Edward's spirits so that he, too, didn't want to go as Magog (as Edward had explained to him). He forced Harry to go as that instead.

But here at Hogwarts, Harry noted as he walked the halls, nobody really liked dressing up. Alex said it was because a lot of people found the act disrespectful, especially when kids dressed up as magical creatures like Goblins or even Giants. Here, it was all about the feast, and for the older students it was even better because they were allowed to leave school and go to Hogsmeade. Some of them were even allowed to go off school bounds during the feast! Harry didn't know where they went or what they did, but most of the older Slytherins were really excited. Even Flint, who usually talks about nothing but Quidditch (at least that Harry's ever heard) was discussing Halloween night. Harry was just happy that he'd be able to see the Boneman Troupe!

As Harry neared the Great Hall, something made him stop in his tracks.

This feeling...

He knew this feeling.

He continued on, emerged from the labyrinth of corridors that led to the entrance hall, and sidled up to the grand staircase, peeking over the rail to survey the area around him. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. He narrowed his eyes.

Edward.

He intoned something quietly, and then cupped the wriggling worm that appeared in his hand suddenly. Waiting for a large group of students to walk by, Harry swiftly joined their ranks and blended with the crowd. Once the hoard of students was close enough, Harry detached himself and crept up to the giant suit of armor Edward was crouching behind. Deftly, he dropped the worm down Edward's shirt.

"Gyah!" Edward bellowed as he tried to clutch at his back, ensuing into one spasmodic dance. Many of the students slowed down to watch curiously. Edward then grabbed at his shirt wildly, yanking it free from his trousers, and flapped it about until the poor worm plopped to the group with a quiet squish.

Harry burst out laughing.

"Dammit, Harry!" he hissed through his teeth, wiping his back as if the worm had left trails of goo. "You know I hate that!" Harry couldn't respond, he was laughing too much. "You always take all the fun away!" Edward accused hotly, tucking his shirt back in.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Harry wheezed, wiping tears from his eyes. Edward stared at him unconvinced. "Really I am!" he laughed.

"Your outpour of sympathy is really touching, Harry. No really. I mean it," Edward replied, deadpanned.

"I hope you weren't waiting for me," Harry said, a little hoarse from the laughter.

"Course not," Edward mumbled. "I've learned that that undertaking is a waste of time," he sighed defeatedly. "No, dear Harry, my intended victim was no other than—"

"Hey guys. What're you standing behind this armor for?" came Alex as he stepped up by the duo.

"For the love of—!" Edward exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. "You see what you did, Harry?" he barked, shoving an accusing finger at him. "My beautiful plans... ruined..." he sobbed. Harry fought the urge not to laugh again at Edward's plight while a clueless Alex stared on.

"Oh... I get it," Alex said suddenly as he caught sight of the still wriggling worm, connecting Edward behind the armor as an evil plot to scare Alex and the worm as Harry's defense against such an act. "This is why I hate Halloween, by the way," he said glacially to Edward.

"Why? It's not like I was successful," Edward pouted. "Because of him!" and he jabbed his thumb over at Harry who was clutching at his sides, hunched over, and shaking slightly.

"Yes, and thank Merlin for that," Alex said as he turned on his heel. "Every year... all the pranks... always the victim... Merlin, thank you for sending me Harry to foil my brothers dastardly plans," Alex chanted as he walked away, his voice getting quieter until he was too far away to be heard.

"BY THE END OF THIS DAY, BROTHER, YOU WILL HAVE BEEN SUFFICIENTLY SPOOKED!" Edward roared after the retreating figure of his twin. He then turned on Harry. "How do you do it, by the way. No one ever sees my pranks coming," Edward asked, now genuinely curious.

"Who knows?" Harry shrugged, his stomach now in agony with the laughing fit. "Innate ability perhaps?"

"Lucky me..."

They parted ways to their respective tables where Harry ate his breakfast slowly (his stomach was still sore) and then made his way to class afterwards. All his classes went by in a blur, thankfully, and without major incident, to Harry's relief. At Herbology, they continued working with the pesky mandrakes, and Harry couldn't even pretend to care anymore about the buggers. He was curious as to how Neville could find them so fascinating, especially after one tried to slap off Harry's fuzzy earmuffs.

Charms was at least a little more interesting as they worked on the colour change charm. This was easy for Harry as it tied in with some of their transfiguration work, but at one point, he was sporting very green and very funny looking hair that took Professor Flitwick quite awhile to undo. He wondered if Nott, his partner, had done it on purpose, but decided that the kid's haughty expression was something he had since birth probably and not because Harry was almost forced to don the hairstyle throughout the day.

After that, Harry had lunch with Alex and Edward at their usual spot by the lake, then it was off to History of Magic for them, the most boring class ever, where Edward promptly fell asleep despite Alex's constant poking, and in which Harry did everything he could not to follow Binns' footsteps and die of boredom. The last class of the day was Transfiguration, the only class Harry had been actively worried about because it was the only other class besides Defense that the Slytherins had with the Ravenclaws. But to Harry's delight they were all kept much too busy trying to turn pairs of bunnies into slippers for anyone to do anything else.

It was the period after classes that took the longest for Harry. He actively tried to concentrate on his homework, but kept thinking about the feast. It didn't help much either when many of the older

years, wearing more formal robes, collectively left the dorms where Professor Snape was awaiting them outside. Harry wondered if he should try and follow them but knew that would be pointless as it was likely Snape was leading the students to Hogsmeade where they could then apparate elsewhere. He didn't know how to apparate, nor did he think he was particularly skilled enough to tail someone like Snape. At all, actually. So he fidgeted restlessly and absentmindedly flipped through pages while waiting for dinner.

He didn't know why he so excited—he checked the ticking clock in the corner once again—he just was.

"Maybe you should just nix the party."

Currently Edward and his brother, along with much of Gryffindor, were occupying the common room, done with the day's classes and lounging about until the feast. Sure they had homework, but only people like his brother or Hermione were mental enough to bother with such frivolity.

At Edward's impromptu suggestion, Neville, the ever intriguing Boy-Who-Lived, looked flustered.

"Oh no, I couldn't do that! Besides, I promised Nearly Headless Nick that I'd go," Neville stammered, his cheeks tinged with red. Edward shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I suppose if you'd made a promise," he said as he rubbed the back of his neck. Poor Neville. Before breakfast this morning, the ever humble hero was cornered by the presiding Gryffindor ghost and hounded into coming to his Death Day party. Edward remembered Neville's expression at hearing such a thing. A Death Day party? Why would someone celebrate the passage of their own life? Nicholas fervently explained that in the ghost world, it was a day to look forward to. Still unconvinced of such a thing but sufficiently guilted, Neville had agreed to go.

"It's just... he seemed pretty down about the whole thing," Neville added, as if his honor needed more explanation.

"Well, Merlin. He is celebrating his death," Ron muttered next to Neville.

"No, I think it's because he wasn't accepted into the headless hunt," he explained.

"How can you possibly go hunt a decapitated head when it's still attached?" piped in Hermione. Edward was amazed that the bushy haired witch was able to look up from her homework for even a minute.

"Details, Hermione," Edward said matter-of-factly. The studious witch opened her mouth as if to lecture Edward and then further, but one warning glance from Alex signifying how futile her efforts would be forced her to drop the topic with one last huff.

"But what's he want you coming for?" Ron asked as he flipped through his Famous Wizards cards dismissively. At that, Neville blushed profusely.

"I don't really know. Guess he just wanted someone to be there," Neville stammered, nervously petting his toad familiar, Trevor.

"What do yeh mean you don't know? It's because yer famous an' all," Seamus jokingly threw out from across the room, but Edward saw how that flippant comment made Neville squirm.

"It's because Neville's the only one of us with any kind of honor," Alex said simply. Edward didn't think it was possible, but Neville turned even redder, forcing him to hide his face behind his wriggling toad.

"N-no... it's not..." Neville mumbled helplessly, but he was spared from having to undervalue himself further when in walked Ginny, looking rather green in the face, followed by Percy, Fred and George.

"Look, Ginny. Mum's been worried. Just please drink this!" Percy pleaded as he stalked his sister with a pepper potion. Fred and George were just one step behind him with one of the twins (Edward thought it was Fred) carrying a bucket. "Ginny?" The Weasley brothers were halted in their pursuit when Ginny, without a word, flew up the stairs to the girls dormitories. Percy stared on helpless after her, still clutching the unused vial of the potion. "Mum's going to kill me," he sobbed. Fred and George exchanged amused looks.

"Then it looks like you'll be needing this," Fred said as he handed over the bucket. Percy took it reluctantly as the twins meandered off.

"Is your sister alright?" Alex asked, after watching the exchange.

"Dunno... she hasn't really said anything to me," Ron sighed. "I bet she's just really annoyed by Percy. That or Fred and George tried out one of their concoctions on her again," Ron proposed. "Glad it wasn't me this time," he added bitterly. "Do you know anything, Hermione?" he asked, looking up at her. She peered over her massive tome over at the staircase leading to the girls' dorm and then to Ron apologetically.

"Can't say that I do. I just thought maybe she was sick," Hermione said. "We don't really talk much."

"Well, she'd tell me if it was anything to worry about," Ron affirmed returning back to his cards. "Hey, by the way, do you think I could tag along tonight?" Ron asked, peering over at Neville expectantly.

"Yeah! Of course! But are you sure you want to?"

"Sure, mate. This Death Day party sounds kind of wicked," Ron said as he neatly began stacking his pile of cards.

"Yeah, alright!" and Neville was beaming.

It was good that Ron wanted to go because Edward was beginning to feel as though he may have to force his own invite on Neville, if only so the Boy-Who-Lived wasn't stuck at such a gathering on his own. But Edward really didn't want to go if he didn't have to. He'd much rather force his presence on Harry. He then wondered if he should attend the party with Neville. After all, it was his duty to watch over him, but Edward selfishly kept telling himself that even though it was Halloween, there was nothing that was going to happen. Neville would be alright, especially with Ron there. The boy may be lacking in drive, and Edward was suspicious that the freckled boy's wand was a hand-me-down, but Ron was still really capable... when it mattered. The kid was an adept chess competitor, after all.

"Well just as long as you guys cut it short, so you can come back and hang with us," Dean said suddenly, looking up from his sketchbook. Edward had almost forgotten the guy was there, the

Gryffindor was so quiet. Neville nodded while he smiled sheepishly, and Ron gave a wave of the hand that said something like, 'Course! Like we'd miss the show.'

"Well on that note, maybe we should all start heading to the Great Hall?" Edward suggested as he stood and stretched.

"Wait a minute. Let me just finish this passage real quick," his brother said, his fingers sliding across the page fervently. Edward rolled his eyes. Why couldn't his brother be more of a procrastinator like him? But he supposed someone had to be the good twin.

"Are you done yet?" Edward asked as much of the Gryffindors had already left. "You know, I wanted to get a good seat!" he said, hoping this would inspire his brother to move it along.

"It's not my fault you decided to announce to the whole common room that it was eating time," his brother quipped.

"No, that's not what I meant," Edward said, beginning to feel antsy.

"What do you mean? Ah, never mind, let's go," his brother said as he closed his book and placed it back into his bag.

"Alright, let's hurry on then," Edward barked as he shoved his brother toward the portrait hole. After scrambling through, which was really Edward crawling through normally while Alex was forcibly shoved out ungracefully by his brother, the twins set off towards the Great Hall.

"You know I know how to navigate to the dining hall, right?" a peeved Alex stated as he tried to get his captive arm free from Edward's hold.

"Sure you do, but you're too slow," Edward laughed as he dragged his struggling twin along.

"Look, I know Halloween is your thing and all, and you're apparently really amped to see the Boneman Troupe, but I don't think we'll get there any faster if I trip and break my neck," Alex snapped.

"There probably be less resistance then," Edward laughed.

"No, I'd be dead weight... or just dead," Alex muttered. "And there be no resistance at all if you'd let my arm go!"

"Sure!" Edward replied blithely as he steered them both into the Great Hall while still holding onto Alex's wrist. The Great Hall was decorated in the usual fanfare one would expect. The great pumpkins Hagrid had been growing were floating above as orange candlelight flickered from behind their grim, carved expressions. There were also a million bats, it seemed, that darted here and there, a stark contrast to the enchanted ceiling which was adorned with the usual floating candles.

"Knew you'd comply," Alex huffed sarcastically once he realized his arm was still being held captive. "Wait... where are we going?" he asked as he was led past the Gryffindor table.

"Here!" Edward announced, finally stopping behind Harry who had been spacing out at the end of the Slytherin table.

"Edward? Alex?" Harry said as though stunned to see his two surrogate brothers.

"Merlin, Edward. You could have just told me. Like I wouldn't have come," Alex admonished as he settled down next to Harry.

"What are you guys—" Harry started.

"I told you it was because you're so slow. We may not have gotten any seats by Harry," Edward explained as he walked around the table to sit across from the two.

"But nobody sits by me—" Harry stated confusedly.

"We're here before half the school is," Alex replied, gesturing behind him to the mainly empty tables.

"It is pretty early—" Harry continued to himself.

"You never know," Edward said simply. "We might've been forced to hex some Slytherins outta their seats."

"That was never going to be an issue—" Harry mumbled, watching the twins amusedly.

"Alright! Next time, I'll sprint down the hall making sure to shove anyone and everyone out of my way," Alex conceded sardonically.

Harry flicked at pretend dust on the table.

"That's all I ask, brother," Edward said sweetly which earned him a scathing look from his twin.

"What's this, Potter? Employing some bodyguards?" came an annoying voice from behind Alex and Harry. Alex turned around quickly, already looking to hex someone (Edward's fault, really), while Harry didn't even bother to acknowledge the individual who Edward recognized as one of Derald's friends, Timothy.

"So I take it no understanding was met?" Edward asked as he smiled over at Harry. Harry closed his eyes and shook his head tiredly.

"Derald just ignores me. This is new though," Harry said, supporting his head on his hand.

"Well, we're not as forgiving as Derald," Timothy hissed as the four other Ravenclaws behind him mirrored his expression. Edward was surprised to see Harry remaining as nonchalant as he was, but soon surmised that it was probably because Harry was expecting such exchanges between himself and the Ravenclaws.

"Look, as I'm sure Harry has explained before, it was an accident," Edward said, trying to take a diplomatic stance... for Harry's sake.

"What do you know? You weren't there!" Timothy spat.

"Well, I can promise you that the next hex hurled won't be an accident," Alex said, wand already held loosely within his grasp. Harry looked over shocked. Edward, too, felt himself straightened in surprise. Had Alex just... threatened someone being awful to their Harry? Were those tears of joy Edward felt in his eyes?

"Alex, it's okay. They won't do anything," Harry said, trying to ease his surrogate brother down from taking action.

"Can't say the same for Alex though, can we?" Edward chimed.

"What are you doing at our table?" came a drawling, bored tone. Well, if it wasn't the Malfoy heir and his two cronies, Edward thought amusedly while his twin and Harry looked over, taken aback.

"Stay out of this," some Ravenclaw boy warned. Malfoy, skilled in dismissing most everyone, Edward thought, kept his haughty focus on the instigator, Timothy, while his two friends, Crabbe and Goyle, stood behind him just looking menacing.

"The feast is starting soon, and I really don't think the professor will be too pleased if they're forced to delay the celebration all because a group of Ravenclaws will be sprouting boils all over their faces. I know I wouldn't be," Malfoy cautioned coolly, narrowing his eyes slightly. Edward wasn't sure if it was because of Malfoy's threat or because their little group was beginning to garner a lot of attention from both student and staff members alike, but Timothy grinded his teeth, hissed out something like 'Fine!', and with the his flanking group, left to join the rest of the Ravenclaws.

Edward, already itching to mess with the Malfoy prat a bit, was expecting Malfoy's question to be posed to him and his brother, too, when the Slytherin, after surveying Edward and his brother for moment with a calculated glance, nodded to Harry, and then sauntered off to sit with the rest of his year mates. Harry watched him leave with a very confused look on his face. Edward was sure he wore the same expression.

"Well... that was... odd," Edward said finally, turning back to Harry and Alex.

"I know! What's that git's problem?" Alex huffed, stuffing his wand back into his robes agitatedly.

"No, I meant Malfoy," Edward specified.

"Wait. Why?" Alex asked, looking back and forth between the two others like he'd miss something.

"It's no big deal, I guess," Harry began, "but he's been ignoring me here the last month. No, not ignoring— Dismissing me— along with pretty much every Slytherin," Harry explained.

"Meaning that that just now—" Edward began.

"— was odd," Alex finished. The trio couldn't speculate any longer on Malfoy as the feast commenced, the food appearing suddenly before them on plates of gold it seemed. Well, Edward and Alex weren't thinking about it, but Harry was sure eating in a daze while throwing cursory glances over at the Malfoy heir. Edward frowned.

"Merlin, Harry!" he exclaimed, pulling Harry back to the feast at hand. "Not very hungry tonight, are you?" Alex looked over curiously and swallowed a rather large mouthful of potatoes.

"Sure I am," he replied shortly, raking his fork across his plate.

"Uh-huh. Just so you know, I'm not going to be the one who gets his ear yelled off by mum when she finds you've famished away," Edward admonished, scooping more spoonfuls of yams onto Harry's plate. "Your skinny enough as it is," he lectured jokingly.

"I can get my own food," Harry said, taking the spoon out of Edward's hand and placing back into it's dish. "It's just... I'm rather confused," he admitted after one more look to Malfoy. Edward and Alex both looked over too. Malfoy was chatting animatedly—and uncharacteristically, Edward thought—with his mates.

"You mean you're suspicious," Edward stated.

"Well... yeah!" Harry replied. "I mean, he acts like I don't exists, and then Timothy shows up and suddenly it's 'let's defend one of our own' for him? Not to mention he didn't say anything about you two sitting here, and like hell Malfoy doesn't have something to say about that," Harry rushed out. The twins exchanged looks.

"Knew he couldn't take me on?" Edward ventured, shrugging his shoulders. Alex threw a pea at his head.

"It's just weird," Harry added, jamming a fork-full of yams into his mouth.

"Course, mate, but isn't loyalty a huge thing with them?" Alex observed.

"I guess, but it's still weird that it was Malfoy," Harry said stubbornly. Alex looked like he was going to add something else, but Edward kicked his leg from under the table and motioned for his twin to let it drop. Maybe Harry was right to be wary of Malfoy.

After the trio had three helpings each of the sumptuous feast, the plates were spelled clean, leaving the students hungry for something else. Dumbledore, after dabbing his beard off with a napkin, stood and addressed the students. He cleared his throat, though he didn't need to, as the whole hall was already waiting in anxious silence.

"Tonight, my students, I am pleased to announce—though I daresay this is hardly a surprise any longer—" and he gazed about them, smiling, "—that we have a special performance. I hope you all welcome them graciously as they came a long way to be here tonight. This is quite a treat, and without further delay, I introduce to you—"

Students were actually leaning forward in anticipation.

"—the Boneman Troupe!" Dumbledore clapped quietly while the entire hall burst out in an uproarious applause. Edward even felt it necessary to give a welcoming whoop! There came a clamorous bang and almost the entire room was filled with smoke. Edward covered his nose and mouth instinctively along with Alex and Harry, but found that after awhile, many of the students were just fine. Hesitantly, he lowered his hands, Alex and Harry mirroring him, and took in a breath.

Merlin it was wonderful! It was like inhaling the freshest air he had ever come across. It filled his lungs, and it smelled of fresh rain. He wondered amusedly if the entirety of Hogwarts was about to go on some drug-induced ride, but knew that Dumbledore would never allow such a thing. This, Edward thought, was most likely a Purifying Charm, though it looked like the after effects of a raging inferno. He had heard that the Boneman Troupe was a brittle group, susceptible to germs more readily than any other creature.

Then the candles flickered out, and after a couple of scattered yells of shock in the dark, a blue flame appeared where the staff table should have been. It danced slowly about as the quiet thrum of a stringed instrument began to sound. It was low and melodious and kept in perfect beat with the blue flame that swiveled and swerved

and then divided in two. This new flame bounced up and down slightly, as Edward heard the steady pound of deep drum, and then after the flame went down another shot out. This one glided about the two others more purposefully, and then the quiet crooning of a higher pitched string instrument sung out.

This dance went on for a minute or two, each flame dancing to their particular instrument when suddenly it all stopped, sound and all. Four quiet seconds ticked by and then on the fifth tick, the flames ignited widely while the music from before pounded back up again. In the center of each flame was a rattling skeleton carrying an instrument.

"Wicked..." Edward breathed out.

One of the skeletons was dressed in a tattered, traditional English tunic, and his skull was adorned with a linen coif under a feathered cap. The long feather brushed against his violin as the bow darted along the strings that his long, pallid, skeletal fingers moved across at impossible speeds.

The second skeleton was of stockier bones and had a long, thick black beard. He wore a fraying, red, woolen robe with close fitting sleeves over breeches tucked into high boots. Cradled under one arm was a goblet drum where his hands patted along its surface in a repetitive doom doom tecka teck, doom tecka tecka teck. Edward especially like the doom parts because the deep boom would reverberate in his chest.

The third one wore black garments with elaborate slashing all up and down so that red lining peeked out from behind. It gave the very gruesome effect of the fellow being cut all over. He was sitting down while he slightly hunched over his beautiful cello, his head bobbing slightly in tune with the somber tune he produced.

As the three skeletons began their song, two more flames appeared. They hovered above, dancing around one another in a beautiful dervish until they broke apart and floated on opposite sides of the current musicians. Then they, too, inflamed until two smaller sets of skeletons appeared.

One, Edward believed this one to be a female, wore a woolen gown with a low rounded neckline, tight sleeves buttoned up to the

underarms, a bodice buttoned in the front center, and a long flowing skirt that swayed as she moved in time with what looked like a much smaller version of the bagpipes.

The last of the five member band was also a female who surprisingly still had much of her long, black hair that curtained her tiny frame perfectly. She wore a beautiful kimono of silk, the long wide sleeves covering two thin arms holding an instrument Edward didn't recognize. She held it straight up and played it with a bow, but it had only one string. But by the notes she produced, one would think it had as many as the violin.

The whole room was enthralled by the music, and Edward noted the dreamy expressions on Harry and Alex's faces and almost laughed because of it. The music was unlike anything he had ever heard—so many odd instruments, but each coupled harmoniously so that one was not more important over the other. It was extraordinary.

The blue flames that encompassed the musicians then began to glow different colors. First green then yellow. It blurred into orange then flickered into purple. It blazed into red, fizzled into pink, and finally it simmered back into its pale blue. Then the flames left their hosts and rose above them, swirling together as different parts off it sparked in the various colors. And just as Edward felt the music coming to its climax, the flames combusted all the bigger, making everyone shield their eyes. But when they opened them again, when they looked back to the skeletons—

There behind them—all around them—as the stringed instruments suspired a high beautiful note, swirled a galaxy alighted by stars.

Edward looked upon the whirlpool of colorful smoke that the extinguished flames had left behind and felt his chest tighten. He almost clutched at it, it was so tight, and he held his breath because he dare not exhale lest he blow this wonder away. There was something in the air. It made the hairs on his skin perk up, like there were parts of him that were reaching out to something he couldn't see. It was warm; it was cold. It was both calming and galvanizing.

It was mind blowing.

The instruments quieted, their notes lifting and falling in whispers as the galaxy coiled around a pale light in the center. This light grew

and grew—the music surged louder and louder while the drum was still, paying it's quiet respects— until it swallowed the galaxy and cracked open. Out flew a white phoenix, and the music exploded once more!

The drum kicked back in and off the bird soared. It dived over students, rushed up to the ceiling, glided between the pumpkins, and was like a shooting star amidst the cloud of bats. Then it flew back to the players and circled in dizzying speeds. Below it a new flame emerged. It branched out like a tree and budded with flowers. Then a branch broke off while the rest of the tree dissipated like vapor. The bird began spiraling down to the branch until, with a boom of the drum, it collided in a spark of light. The drum silenced once more, and then each of the others in turn until only the one stringed instrument was left singing.

The branch, now smaller and glowing with power, cascaded slowly down to the ground, the one stringed instrument humming lowly, until it touched the floor and blew away in a tendril of smoke. The music stopped and all was quiet.

Edward couldn't move in that moment, and he knew Alex and Harry were still as well. The skeletal crew stood before them, silent as well, probably used to such a reaction, until collectively, the hall erupted into earsplitting applause punctuated with bouts of cheering and whistling. Even when the staff re-appeared, all the teachers, even Snape, were clapping. Edward found he could barely contain himself, he was so overjoyed. That had been one bloody good show!

The Boneman Troupe stepped forward and bowed, their instruments seeming to incline with them in reserved gratitude. Edward never imagined it would have been this fantastic. He was clapping so much he thought he'd break his hands. He wanted to shout out for an encore, but knew that the show had concluded.

Once the students settled down to a more manageable clamor, Dumbledore stood once more and bowed deeply to the musicians.

"That is something I have never had the privilege of seeing... but am so humble as to have seen it now," Dumbledore said, and Edward believed him wholeheartedly. The troupe bowed to Dumbledore, and Edward had the silly feeling that this is what is what like to witness a legend being born. Then the troupe waved a hand over their

instruments, alighting them with that same mystic flame that choked out into wisps of smoke and their instruments with it.

With one last bow to the audience, one by one, the crew walked down and broke off so that each member walked between the tables in a lateral procession. On one side of the Slytherin table, walked the drummer, while on the side with Alex and Harry walked the cellist. Edward didn't blink, didn't move. As the two members passed, he felt something cold. He thought it was the touch of death.

He saw Harry in front of him, breathing heavily as the cellist stopped before him. It said nothing, but Harry stared up into its gaping black eye sockets until the moment passed. The skeleton stalked off, and Harry was released. Harry touched his forehead absentmindedly, and Edward frowned.

Then the group, rejoined once more by the door, turned to face the hall, and each with an arm raised high, slammed it down until a clap of light swallowed them all.

...and they were gone.

For awhile the hall didn't know what to do with itself, the students torn between confusion and reverence. Then Dumbledore announced the conclusion of the festivities, and slowly the students stood to leave. Edward got up as if unsure he should; he was still lost in awe, but then he trudged away with Alex and Harry beside him.

The three made it to the staircase when Harry suddenly exclaimed, "Merlin! That was the most fantastic thing I've ever seen!" and he looked to the two others for agreement, his face alighted. Edward grinned widely.

"I know, mate! I don't think I breathed the entire time!" Edward admitted as they ascended the stairs. All the students around them were gabbing wildly about it, too.

"They were so wicked looking, too!" Alex added. "I wonder how they're, you know... walking about and stuff."

"I heard that they were so distraught when they died that their souls fused with their bones," Harry said. "Kind of like how the Hogwarts ghosts are here."

"But then why aren't they just ghosts?" Alex asked.

"Because they needed a more... substantial form to be in," Harry explained. "The ghost can't really do anything because they have no bodies, but the Boneman Troupe... Well... they do."

"No, no. I thought it was because a powerful Necromancer was experimenting with soul transference," Edward stated.

"Yeah, but why would someone bring back musicians?" Harry question as they continued past the second floor.

"Maybe they weren't musicians at first," Alex conspired.

"What do you mean?" Harry inquired.

"It's just... maybe they were the most powerful wizards of their time, and someone wanted them back. I mean, just look at what they could do! They didn't have wands—they didn't talk, so they couldn't verbally cast spells—" Alex began.

"But there are loads of wizards that can do non-speaking spells," Edward stated.

"Sure, but like I said... they didn't have wands."

"Maybe their instruments are the wands?" Harry ventured, and the three of them fell silent as they contemplated this wondrous thought. Edward imagined that violinist spelling someone with the Boil hex while playing Mozart or something. It was kind of funny.

"What do you think that whole thing had been about though," Harry asked.

"You mean the galaxy and phoenix?" Edward clarified.

"Yeah."

"Dunno, but we can ask Hermione!" Edward smiled.

"Bet you anything, she'd know what that all meant," Alex laughed.

"By the way, Harry. Did that cellist say anything to you?" Edward asked suddenly. Harry almost fumbled and tripped on the stairs, but Alex caught him before he could seriously fall.

"What?" he asked, holding onto the rail. Edward eyed him confusedly, while Alex kept a grip under Harry's arm as if for further support.

"I thought he stopped by you," Edward said slowly. "Said something maybe. Was I wrong?" Harry concealed his face from the twins, so Edward didn't know what kind of face Harry was making. And that was usually the only way Edward ever knew what Harry was thinking.

"I don't really know," Harry began quietly. "It was all a bit... weird. I mean, I think I heard something, but I don't know what it was," Harry explained helplessly. Edward caught the eye of his twin, and Alex frowned.

"I didn't hear anything though," Alex piped in. "And I was right next to you."

"That's the thing that's weird," Harry said looking up at Alex. "It was like it was inside my head or something."

"You don't have any idea of what it said?" Edward prodded. Harry closed his mouth and tilted his head thoughtfully. They group reached the seventh floor, and Edward pulled Harry aside, away from the mass crowd so as not to be overheard. He didn't know why he did it; he just did. Alex, without missing a beat or as if he had been contemplating the same act, followed suit, and the three of them huddled next to the statue of Lachlan the Lanky.

"I can't be sure... but it sounded something like... 'yar shii-na-la...'," Harry said, and when he quoted the skeleton, he tried to do a creepy, whispered voice. Edward laughed.

"Edward!" Alex chided him, shoving his brother somewhat. Harry look confused.

"I'm sorry!" he croaked out. "But what kind of voice was that?" Harry smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck.

"I don't know! That's how it sounded!" and Harry couldn't help but smile then, too. This assured Alex who let up on possibly hurling a hex at Edward for his bad taste.

"Those aren't even words!" Edward chuckled.

"That you know of," Alex reminded.

"Well... the guy doesn't have lips," Harry tried to defend, watching Edward double over in hysterics quizzically but with a slight smile tugging at his lips. "You try forming words!"

"But he spoke in your head right? Why would he need lips?" Edward challenged, coming down from his giggle fit somewhat.

"Well the guy's been dead since like... the twelfth century! You try and remember how to talk," Alex suggested hotly in Harry's defense.

"You're right, you're right!" Edward conceded finally, and then he glanced over at Harry who was doing that 'I refuse to laugh with you' expression. "So... what did that skeleton say again?" he asked evenly.

"Oh come off it!" Alex chastised, but even his brother was beginning to smile.

"He told me you're a git," Harry replied.

"Then he was right to warn you," Edward chuckled.

"By the way Harry... shouldn't you be heading back towards the dungeons?" Alex said suddenly, looking around as if expecting to see Filch lurking in the shadows behind them.

"Yeah, mate, why are you up here anyway?" Edward asked.

"Oh! I dunno..." Harry said looking around confusedly. "Didn't realize I had walked up here. Guess I just got caught up," he smiled sheepishly. "But I'll see you guys later!" he said, throwing up a hand slightly as a means of goodbye. He went to turn around, but stopped

suddenly, tilting his head slightly as if hearing something. Edward looked around, but all he heard was the loud chatter of the nearby students.

"What is it, mate?" Alex asked cautiously, tilting his head, too, as though trying to hear what Harry did.

"It's that voice again," Harry said quietly, looking around up at the walls and ceiling. Edward furrowed his brows.

"That skeleton guy again?" he ventured. Harry shook his head.

"No... this is something... different," and that was all he offered before he hurried off. "Come on!" he called, and Edward and Alex didn't need any more encouragement before they tore off after Harry.

And all Edward could think was, 'What's going on?'

Harry had heard this voice before, and this time he was gonna find out whose it was.

He was convinced it was Peeves but still couldn't let it go. He had to know for sure. He bumped into several students along the way, all who looked accosted even after he had mumbled his hurried apologies, but Harry just had to follow that voice. It was muffled with no distinguishable words, but the frightening voice was unmistakable.

He felt Edward and Alex keeping up behind him as they leapt down the staircase to the first floor. Their presence made him more confident that this time... that voice wasn't going to slip away. Harry halted to a stop. He couldn't hear anything over the chatter of the lingering students. Where had it...?

"Harry, what's going—"

"Shh! I'm trying to listen for a second—"

"... soo hungry... soo thirsty..."

"Do you hear that?" Harry urged, his heart thumping wildly in his chest. Edward and Alex looked around confusedly. Harry put his ear

up against the wall. It was getting fainter. "This way!" and he shot back up to the stairs.

"... tear... rip... shred..."

Oh, Merlin. Oh, Merlin, Harry thought as they whipped around the stairs unto the second floor and shot off down the empty halls. He could barely hear the bone chilling voice, his heart was beating so loud.

"Harry! Please! Tell us what's happening!" he heard Alex plead.

"Hold on a minute!" and Harry looked around frantically. It was here. He knew it was here. He strained his ears.

"... rip... eat... KILL!"

"No!" Harry shouted in protest, running off and not stopping until they turned into the last stretch of an empty hall. Where was it? What was it?

...but nothing was there.

"Harry, what's wrong? I can't hear anything! And you know I can hear better than most—"

"Bloody hell..." Alex breathed out, looking horrified as he stared down the passage way. Harry narrowed his eyes.

What was that on the wall?

Harry ventured closer, his steps hesitant. Whatever it was glistened in the flickering light of the nearby torches. His footsteps echoed in the bizarrely quiet hall until he heard splashing noises. He looked down. Water. Water was all around him...

"What the hell?" Edward exclaimed, lifting his feet up one by one to examine the water beneath.

"Harry... look," Alex whispered, and he pointed to the wall up ahead. Harry's stomach flipped.

There, gleaming high along the wall, in wet, oozing, red writing, a message had been written.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

"There's something else, too," Edward said, narrowing his eyes, and stepping forth cautiously, but Harry saw what it was... Knew who it was.

Hanging beneath one of the torches, unmoving and lifeless, was Mrs. Norris, the caretaker's cat.

"Who would do this?" Alex asked, horrified once he, too, noticed the cat.

"Come on! We have to get her down," Edward said, as he stood on his tippy toes to reach the cat just out of his reach.

"Edward, I think we should leave her," Alex said, looking about scared.

"We can't leave her!" Harry exclaimed. He pulled out his wand to try and levitate the cat down when Edward suddenly exclaimed.

"OH SHIT! Neville!" and Harry rushed up to where Edward had slid to a stop. Crumbled in a heap of black robes off to the side, but still breathing, lay Neville. Edward leaned down while Harry knelt beside the unconscious Gryffindor. His pants soaked up the water, and he wondered what chilled him more. The water or this sight.

"We have to go get help!" Alex shouted, turning around about to tear off.

"Don't bother!" Edward shouted out, halting his brother in his steps.

"Why not?" Alex demanded. Harry was careful not to move Neville too much for fear of worsening whatever was done to him.

"Because they're already here," Edward said sternly. Harry didn't know what to do. Should they try and enervate him?

"He doesn't look injured," Edward said quietly. Harry looked up, and his stomach lurched again. He had never seen such a panicked expression on Edward's face before. This was bad. This was so bad.

"Down here, professors! I heard somethin'. Bet yeh it's some students tryin' to stay out past curfew," the trio heard Filch say.

"Come on, Neville! Wake up," Harry said, hoping the collapsed Gryffindor would open his eyes.

"I'm sure everything's in order, Filch." Oh no, Harry thought. It was McGonagall. What was she going to say when she saw this?

"Still, Minerva, best not be too careful," came an icy voice. Harry's blood drained. Snape, too?

"See! I told you! I knew I heard something!" Filch exclaimed as he limped hurriedly down the corridor towards them.

"Severus, do you see?"

"I know, Minerva."

"Thought you all would sneak away, eh? Thought you could get past ol' Filch here, but I was on to yeh, you snot-nosed, little—" And then he froze and Harry closed his eyes as his heart dropped to the pit of his stomach. "What—? Is that—? Mrs. Norris?" Filch stumbled over to his dangling cat and held up his hands tentatively, touching the very ends of Mrs. Norris' paw. Then he turned on Harry and Edward.

"You did this! Didn't you? I swear it—I'll have you both strung up by your ears and left to rot in the dun—"

"Mr. Filch! Enough!" And Professor McGonagall came to Harry's side.

"You seen what they did to her?" Filch cried, and Harry saw tears welling out of the haggard caretaker's eyes.

"What happened here?" McGonagall asked as she waved her wand over the felled Neville. Nothing happened.

"We don't—I don't—" Harry stammered.

"They should be expelled! Oh, Mrs. Norris!"

"Filch!" Snape snapped, his voice quiet and cold. Filch squelched his cry and turned slowly to Snape, the potion teacher's black, lightless eyes unflinchingly fixed upon Harry. "Go get the Headmaster."

Filch made no sign of moving or of ever having truly heard the Potions professor.

"Mr. Filch, I've got her," McGonagall said softly as Mrs. Norris was levitated slowly up and down to rest just outside the puddle of water.

"Now, Mr. Filch," Snape ordered. Looking upon his cat helplessly one more time, he flew off down the corridor faster than Harry could have ever thought possible. Then that left them. Alex was stock still behind McGonagall who still hovered over Neville. Edward was biting his lip watching the Transfiguration teacher intently, and Snape...

Snape crossed his arms and held Harry's shaking gaze whose head felt like it had been ripped open. He hissed quietly with the pain, and Snape narrowed his eyes. Harry turned away, clutching at the ends of Neville's soaking cloak.

Minutes passed so slowly that it seemed time itself had stopped. McGonagall intoned quickly and quietly. Her mouth forming complicated spells Harry had never heard of while her wand swirled in intricate patterns. Edward was almost as still as his Gryffindor housemate while Harry closed his eyes. Then he heard more footsteps until they stopped just before them.

"Headmaster," Snape announced evenly. Dumbledore looked upon the scene, his half-moon spectacles reflecting the quivering torchlight. He noted the wall, the message, then the cat, then Neville, and finally the trio who had come across it to begin with. Harry could not read the wizard's expression. When the headmaster spoke, his voice was firm and level, so unlike the frail tone Harry normally heard, and it unnerved him wholly.

"Severus," Dumbledore began, "what has happened here?"

A/N: Woot! And this huge chapter is done! Hope you enjoyed and will hopefully review!

Chp15